

HalfLife: Breakthrough

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Summary: All efforts to contain the Black Mesa incident have failed, and the invasion has spread to nearby civilized areas. Now, a handful of locals struggle to keep it from spreading further and more importantly, to survive. Finished: 1128

## 1. Diffuse Reflection

### Author's Note

This story takes place near or in several real towns and cities in New Mexico. I apologize if the descriptions I give them are inaccurate; I didn't do too much homework on this one.

Monday, 11:15 A.M.- Eighty Miles North of Carrizozo, New Mexico

The hot sun scorched the landscape with cruel intensity, sapping the already dry ground of any moisture that might have remained from that morning's dew. Juan Vasquez, a middle-aged, obese, mustachioed Hispanic man, rocked wearily in a wooden rocking chair on the porch of his store. The aluminum roofing protruded far enough to protect him from the full effect of the heat, although its glare may have blinded any bird careless enough to fly over it.

His store, aging and generic, stood on the side of Route 54, bearing a sign, once painted red but now faded to a dull pink, that said "Gas-Food-Drink." Few people ever traveled Route 54, and so most of the time, Juan and whomever else were running the store sat around enduring the heat.

He heard an electrical burst from within the store, followed by a dull thump. He shook his head in dismay. For two days the air conditioner had been broken, yet Diego, the employee who ran the store, insisted on fixing it by himself. Juan kept telling him that he would make it worse, that they should call an electrician, but Diego would not listen. At last, inevitably, Diego learned the hard way.

"\_No entiendes, Diego\_" Juan shouted. He listened for a response. He heard nothing, save for the howling wind and the distant squawks of vultures.

He heard a flush of the toilet, followed by Diego's muffled shout, "\_Que?\_"

"\_Ya ves, pero no entiendes nada!\_" Juan shouted again, with a laugh.

Diego responded with a scream. There was a thump, and no more.

Juan got to his feet, and shuffled through the door. He scanned the shop. He looked first to the right... an abandoned counter, topped with an obsolete cashier, in front of walls of tobacco products and behind racks of tabloids. He looked to the left... racks filled with products, then the open door of the bathroom. He glanced to the back of the store, covered in refrigerator products, below a large fan that didn't work.

Then he looked to the floor.

Covered in bags of potato chips that had fallen off a nearby rack lay Diego, motionless. On his head was a swollen, pallid, throbbing mass. Juan had crept closer, to inspect the odd shape, when from behind another rack came a scream. He turned suddenly, in time to see a blurred shape, looking much like the underbelly of a large spider, with tiny fangs lining the opening of an expectant mouth. The shape clasped tightly around his face, allowing no scream to escape his lips as the fangs chewed through his skin.

Monday, 11:35 A.M.- Twenty miles west of Roswell, New Mexico

Tim Jamison sped down the road at well over eighty miles per hour, riding comfortably in his air-conditioned Lexus. In the passenger seat sat his wife, Emily Jamison, holding a pamphlet entitled "Exploring New Mexico."

"Honey, are you sure we'll find anything interesting in Roswell?" she said.

Tim laughed. "Are you kidding?" he said. "Roswell is the most famous confirmed location of alien sightings. They're bound to have a few tourist traps in there somewhere." Tim was a huge alien conspiracy buff, absorbing every detail of every new UFO sighting.

"But there's nothing about Roswell in this pamphlet..."

"That's 'cause the government of New Mexico is ashamed of the incident that occurred there."

"Well, here's a nice cliff dwelling place..."

"No, Emily. Roswell is the place to be."

Emily sighed. "Tim, you know I don't even believe in any of those supposed 'alien' conspiracies."

"Then maybe this trip will help you change your mind!"

"I don't know..."

There was a loud explosion from the left of the car, and immediately, it began swerving violently. Tim wrestled with the steering wheel, slammed on the breaks. He looked out the rear-view mirror in time to see both tires on the left side tumble away in shreds, before the car bounced and began flipping mercilessly, until coming to a stop, upside down, in a ditch.

Emily groaned. Tim looked at her, and saw a huge gash in her forehead. The roof of the car was crushed, and she had been hurt when her head bounced against it.

Tim unbuckled his seatbelt and fell roughly. He crawled out of the car and gasped as the midday heat enveloped him. It was hot, even for New Mexico... easily 125 degrees.

He wandered down the road in a daze. He realized that his head was bleeding, and that he probably had a few broken ribs. He needed an ambulance, as did his wife... but they did not have a cell phone. His only hope was to flag down a car.

In the meantime, he wanted to see what had destroyed his tires. He backtracked for almost half a mile. On the way, he saw the remains of his tires. Both were crumpled and torn extensively, but the most striking detail was a deep gash, covering almost the entire circumference.

Tim was getting tired. His feet were shuffling lazily across the dusty road. He did not notice a large, black thorn jutting from the dust. He caught his left shoe on it, and it cut through the sole and into his foot.

He fell onto the hot road, screaming and holding his foot in pain. As he writhed in agony, the ground around the black thorn crumbled away. From the hole in the road rose a large, green, snake-like creature, with a long, black beak. It wailed like a hurt animal.

Tim crawled along the dirt road with his hands. The green creature turned and struck the road with its beak, leaving a deep gouge.

\_Oh shit.\_

Tim got to his feet and limped away, frantically. The green creature struck at him, cleaving his right leg in two. He howled in pain, fell on his back, and, twisting his arms, crabwalked away.

The creature drew back its head, and struck again. This time the beak hit his chest, driving down until it came to a stop deep in the ground below. Hot blood gushed out of the wound, splattering his body, rushing up his windpipe, spurting from his nose and mouth, all while he watched in horror.

The creature struck again, slicing his brain and ending his life. It struck again and again, dashing Tim's body until all that remained was a splatter of blood covering the breadth of the road.

1:08 P.M.- Thirteen miles northwest of Carrizozo, New Mexico

Lieutenant Alfonso Lopez wiped his forehead with his sleeve and dropped his rifle, letting it swing on the strap around his shoulder. He stood to the side of the blockade, along with the rest of the police force. His eyes burned from staring, even with his sunglasses covering his entire field of vision. The desire to jump into the police car behind him and turn the A/C on full blast was burning more than his skin, but he dared not to.

Earlier that day, they had received warning of a trucker speeding dangerously over the speed limit, southbound. It was puzzling indeed; the truck was going downhill, but if it was a case of failed brakes, the trucker could have pulled his rig to the side of the road where it would surely come to a stop, instead of careening down the highway until he hit another car or civilization itself. The blockade consisted of road spikes and roadblocks, behind which were five police cars and twelve armed policemen. If the trucker didn't stop, his truck would be severely damaged, and he would face heavy criminal charges. Personally, Alfonso didn't expect it to come to that. Truckers may not be terribly bright, but they weren't stupid.

At the shimmering horizon, he saw the dark shape of a truck. When it was in hearing distance, the captain raised his megaphone and spoke into it. "You there," his tinny voice boomed. "This is the police. You are ordered to stop your vehicle in a timely manner."

The truck did not stop. The captain spoke again. "This is your last warning. Stop your vehicle or face the consequences."

Because of the heat's effect on vision, and because the road was so flat, neither the captain nor the police officers realized exactly how fast the 18-wheeler was moving. One moment, the captain was raising the megaphone to his lips to issue a harsher warning, and the next, a warning was shouted for all men to "look out," followed by Alfonso turning his head and leaping headlong into the dirt at the side of the road. There was a crunch, a series of quick bursts, and a tremendous crash. Out of one open eye, Alfonso saw three crumpled police cars come tumbling and whirling through the air, pieces of tinted glass glittering in the sun, flying in every which direction. Behind him, he saw two of his fellow officers laying flat on the dirt, while splintered pieces of the roadblocks bounced off their bodies. Alfonso turned his head the other way, and beyond the totaled cars, he saw, already a great deal away, the responsible truck, swerving on flat tires, going off the road, and finally falling onto its side, coming to a rough stop.

\_Jesus H. Christ,\_ he thought. \_That thing must've been going over a hundred and twenty!\_ After a moment more in the dirt, Alfonso got to his feet, dusted himself off, held up his shotgun, and made his way to the fallen truck. It was hidden in a cloud of dust which it had disturbed, making him even more wary of what he may find. The other officers began to follow his lead, holding shotguns and pistols alike.

Alfonso stepped on something squishy. He looked down, and with a groan of disgust and pity, saw the remains of his captain, still holding the handle to the now shattered megaphone. He continued on, hearing similar groans from his comrades as they, too, passed the body.

He found himself standing several feet from the cracked windshield of the truck, along with the other officers. He wiped the dust off his sunglasses. When enough dust had cleared for decent visibility, the officer closest to the driver's side door tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. Alfonso drew forward, and with the butt of his gun, shattered the windshield. They all saw, and gasped.

The driver, a stereotypical trucker with a pot belly and baseball cap, was strapped into the front seat, and clearly dead. There were several gashes on his arms and torso, surrounded by rings of dried blood. They paid no attention to these because of the driver's face and hands. His face was covered with a heavy, round, blob of flesh, which hung limply onto the head by four legs dug deep into the his skull. The driver's hands were also peculiar, as the fingers were twice as long as normal, tapered to a sharp point, and red with blood. Alfonso turned his head, looking down to the floor of the cab, where the driver's foot, evidently from a death spasm, was pressing the gas all the way down.

"Go around to the back," Alfonso said, pointing to two of his gawking comrades. They hurried around the truck. Alfonso heard their grunts as they strained to open the door. Finally, it slid open.

After a moment's pause, Alfonso heard, "Hey, everyone, look at this!"

Alfonso and the others joined them at the back of the truck, where they had a clear view of what was inside. Amidst half a dozen crates were twice as many dead animals. They had large, gray bodies, four legs tipped by sharp points, and sickly jaws on their undersides. An officer stepped in and nudged one of the creatures with his foot.

"They sure do resemble that thing hanging onto the guy's face," the officer said grimly. "New species of tarantula, maybe?"

"Tarantula my ass," growled another. "We need some Polaroids for evidence. I'll see if I can salvage the camera."

He walked briskly around the truck towards the crumpled cars. The officer inside the truck crawled even deeper.

"I got another stiff!" he shouted. A pause. "Wait, never mind. He's alive. Knocked out cold, though."

They all heard a thump, followed by a shout, followed by two more thumps. They rushed around the truck to see what it was. Standing at the side of the road was the truck driver, hunched over the officer's mutilated body. The truck driver stretched his unnaturally long fingers towards the body, twisting the body's left arm off at the shoulder. He then brought the arm up to his mouth.

The other officers jumped as if coming out of a trance, and simultaneously drew their weapons and called to the truck driver. It lifted its head towards them, and they all saw that the creature was still attached. Moments later, it stood up and began limping their way, arms outstretched. The officers fired shot after shot into its body, neither slowing it down nor hurting it. It wasn't until Alfonso fired a shotgun round into the creature attached to its head that it fell to the ground. He went to the body and examined the wounds. They

weren't bleeding.

"This guy was already dead," he muttered.

The officer who was inside the back of the truck came out, carrying the man who was inside. The man wore a blue security guard uniform, held a standard issue pistol with no ammo, and had a nasty cut in his head, conceivable the same one that had knocked him out. Alfonso patted him down, coming up with only an I.D. Badge. It read:

Black Mesa Research Facility

Barney G. Calhoun

Level 2 Access Security Guard

Alfonso had heard of the Black Mesa Research Facility sometime before. He believed it was one of the nearby government facilities that nobody knew anything about. He turned his head to the dead truck driver with that creature on its face and frowned.

"Call for backup, David," Alfonso called to the officer in question, not taking his eyes off the truck driver's body. "We're in a bigger mess than I thought we were."

## 2. Rejected Hypothesis

Calvin Anderson gripped the clutch on his dirt bike, kicked into third gear, and felt the bike propel forward with sudden new force. The glee of going up a gear never seemed to go away, even though he had been dirt biking for years. The roar of the engine and that of his friend, Greg's, bike, both muffled by the helmet he wore, were the only sounds he could hear in this wilderness.

Suddenly, Greg's bike whipped past his, going ahead quickly. When he was already far ahead of Cal, he did a wheelie.

"Show-off!" Cal shouted, kicking his bike into fourth gear.

Cal, a seventeen-year-old native of New Mexico, had shaggy, black hair, which the girls at his school loved because it was "untamed," and skin darkened by his constant time spent in the sun. Now that school was over, Cal was looking forward to spending every day of his last summer before college like this... dirt biking with his friends or playing paintball. When they got tired, they would relax afterward with beer he had smuggled out of his father's stash, and then shooting the beer cans with a shotgun (again taken secretly from his father). His parents had commented many times that he might as well live in the wilderness, since he spent every waking moment there anyway. Cal and his friends did go camping occasionally, but the ever-present regulations and anti-overnight signs took the fun out of it. Besides, sleeping all night on top of rocky ground in the cold of the desert wasn't as fun as spending the day alone before...

Cal believed he saw it before Greg did, but he wasn't sure. Behind a large boulder approximately fifty yards ahead of Greg's bike came some sort of spider, only it was nearly as big as the boulder, had four legs, and a pale sack hanging underneath its body. He hit the brakes until his bike screeched to a halt, but Greg did not react

until it was too late. The spider squirted his bike with a clear liquid, which instantly ate away at the metal bars and the tires. Greg lost control and went sprawling onto the ground before the giant spider. The spider jabbed with its front legs, dashing Greg's body to pieces, and that's when Cal turned his bike and sped away.

\_First gear.\_

The spider noticed his take off right away and gave chase, screaming a high-pitched scream that sent a cold shiver up his spine. Cal turned his head, and to his horror, the spider was quickly gaining, despite its size and the throbbing sack attached to its underbelly. Cal waited until his bike was going fast enough, then shifted gears.

\_Second gear.\_

The spider was starting to lose him, and it began running at full speed. Still, Cal's bike was slowly getting ahead of it. The spider screamed again, and sent a squirt of the clear liquid his way. The liquid landed with a sizzling splat on a yucca plant mere feet from Cal's bike.

\_Third gear.\_

Cal felt the familiar push of acceleration, only he did not savor it. The spider had sent another squirt of liquid at him, which landed a few yards behind him. When he was going fast enough, Cal shifted gears again.

\_Fourth gear.\_

By now, the spider was well behind him. It wailed miserably, but it did not give up. As the spider passed behind a boulder, Cal let out a sigh of relief. He didn't stop or downshift gears until he reached their campsite, where two of his friends were chilling with a cooler full of beers.

Cal screeched to a sudden stop right next to his friends, pushing a cloud of dust into their faces. They coughed and waved their hands irritably.

"Damn, Cal," one of his friends, Alex, said. "Next time you pull that stunt, do it a little farther from..."

"We've got to go," Cal said, killing the bike's engine and rolling it towards the back of his old pickup truck. "Now."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute," the other friend, Nathan, said, standing up. "What about my turn?"

"And where the hell's Greg?" said Alex.

"Greg's dead," Cal said, the words falling out of his mouth like dead rats. "If I took any more time to explain, we'd \_all\_ be dead. Now, \_move.\_"

His friends moved quickly now, shooting worried glances at Cal as they folded up the lawn chairs and threw them and the beer cooler into the back of the pickup truck. Cal got into the driver's seat,

Alex got into the passenger's seat, and Nathan hopped into the back; the truck had a two seat cab.

As Cal turned the ignition, the spider was coming into sight.

"Jesus!" Nathan said, flattening his body against the back of the cab. "What the fuck is \_that?\_"

"No questions!" Cal shouted. "Let's go!"

Cal planted his foot on the gas, and the pickup rumbled off. He never liked how slow it accelerated, and the bumpy path wasn't making it any better. He shifted into second, but the spider was gaining.

"Cal..." Nathan mumbled, his shaky voice full of fear.

"Shoot it, damn it!" Cal roared. "Why do I have to \_think\_ for you?"

Nathan fished through the junk in the back of the pickup and came up with Cal's dad's shotgun. He loaded it with shaky fingers, pointed it at the spider's sack, thought better of it, and shot for the leg. It missed. When it was close enough, the spider lifted the sack and fired a translucent object into the back of the pickup. When Nathan got a good look at it, he saw that it resembled an infant form of the spider.

"Holy hell," he mumbled. "It fucking \_gave birth!\_"

He shot several shots at the baby. It jumped at him, leaving a small laceration on his left arm. He screamed angrily, then beat the baby with the butt of the shotgun until it was nothing more than a grease mark. He then turned to the giant spider, who was beginning to lose the pickup. It squirted its clear acid at the pickup, which splattered all over the dirtbike. The dirtbike melted down before his eyes. Nathan aimed the shotgun again, this time at the sack, and fired. The bullet managed to pierce the sack's thick skin, and green liquid dribbled out. The spider screamed, but the pain only agitated its anger, and it began to pick up speed. It sent squirt after squirt of acid at the truck, melting down the cooler, the lights, and the bumper. The pickup hit a gouge in the path, losing speed and allowing the spider a chance to gain on it. The spider spewed forth more acid, and this time, Nathan himself was the victim. Alex saw, and Cal heard, Nathan's painful screams, until the liquid's effect terminated his life. The spider continued shooting acid.

"Alex," Cal said, his voice shaky. "Listen to me. I need you to pick up the shotgun and... and keep shooting. Until that thing stops chasing us."

Alex nodded, opened the window between the cab and the back, and reached through it. He grasped the nozzle of the shotgun; thankfully, the acid had not destroyed it. He pulled it free of Nathan's grip and aimed it at the spider. He fired, striking the sack where it met the underbelly. It opened an artery in the beast, allowing green liquid to spurt violently from the wound. Alex had fired two more rounds before the spider's anger gave way to pain, and it finally slowed to a stop. As the pickup truck sped away, the spider wailed its



mournful, horrible wail.

Alex dropped the shotgun and turned back to the front, staring out the windshield with blank eyes. Cal looked at Alex's hands; they were trembling. He turned and looked at his own hands, and noticed that they were both white from gripping the steering wheel. The sound of burning flesh and plastic could be heard faintly from the back, until Alex closed the window with a grunt. Neither of them spoke until they reached Carrizozo city limits.

Monday, 3:05 P.M.- Presbyterian Hospital, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Barney crept through an empty corridor of an old prison, wielding a piece of rusty pipe that he had taken from under a bathroom sink. The walls around him were plastered with either old blood or rust; it was becoming hard to tell which was which. The stink of rotting corpses filled his nostrils, and the screams of tortured prisoners filled his ears. He suddenly became aware that he was barefoot, that he could feel the cold stone on his feet. He looked down, and realized that he wasn't wearing the blue uniform he had been accustomed to wearing during this disaster; he was wearing a tattered, bright orange prisoner's uniform. A nagging part of his brain told him, \_This is wrong. It's not supposed to be like this. \_But he ignored that part of his brain, because he knew that he had to get out of here, that he had to warn somebody.

He heard shuffling feet echoing from down the corridor, around a corner. He flattened himself against the wall forming the interior of the corner, with the bathroom pipe ready for attack.

\_It's wrong and you know it,\_ the nagger spoke again. \_It never happened like this. In fact, there is no prison in the Black Mesa Research Facility. It's wrong and you know it. It's wrong and you know it. It's wrong and you...\_

"Shut up!" Barney screamed. Deep throated, alien cries came from down the corridor, and the shuffling feet became running feet. His grip tightened on the pipe.

Suddenly, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, turning him around and pushing him down the corridor. The vortigaunt alien in front of him approached slowly, cackling as it went. By the time Barney realized that it wasn't cackling laughter he heard, but the crackle of intense electrical energy, it was too late to do anything but scream.

He did scream, but only briefly. He opened his eyes, and found himself in a hospital bed wearing a light blue hospital smock, with a layer of cold sweat on his skin. He turned his head, and as he did so, pain shot through his head. He put his hand to his forehead, feeling a bandage there. His mind raced to recall what had caused this wound.

The door to the room opened. Barney leaped out of the bed and crouched in a corner, trembling. In walked a bearded man in a white suit.

"Hello, Mr. Calhoun," the bearded man said gently. "I'm Dr. Holmes. How are you feeling?" When Barney didn't answer, Dr. Holmes said with a laugh, "Not too good, I see."

"Wh-wh-where am I?" Barney muttered fearfully.

"You are in Presbyterian Hospital," Dr. Holmes said. "Albuquerque. The police found you some miles north of Carrizozo, unconscious, in the back of a truck. They brought you here." He cleared his throat. "If you're feeling better, the police are here to ask you some questions."

Slowly, things began coming back to Barney. He shuddered as memories of the events of the past weeks came back to him.

"Would you like to rest some more?" Dr. Holmes asked.

Barney shook his head violently. "I want to get out of here," he said. "The sooner the better."

"Good!" Dr. Holmes said cheerfully. "We'll need you to sign some forms, and, of course, the police still need to ask you those questions." Dr. Holmes lifted a clipboard and put a pen to it. "Will your employer... er... 'Black Mesa Research Facility...' cover this?"

"No," Barney said weakly, standing up. "Not anymore."

When the hospital staff returned Barney's uniform to him, they asked if he would rather wear a hospital loaner. The blue uniform was grimy, torn, bloodstained, and stinky. Barney acquiesced, but didn't say the reason why... he wanted to be rid of the memories of what happened while he was wearing that uniform. He got a pair of loose-fitting work pants, sneakers, and a white "YMCA" t-shirt. The only thing he kept was his watch.

A nurse then escorted him to the waiting room, where a stern-looking, Hispanic police officer was waiting for him. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Lopez, and added, "but call me Alfonso."

"We need to know what happened with the truck you came in," Alfonso said. "And what you know about those creatures inside."

Barney frowned, pushing his recent memories as far away as possible. "I'd rather not," he said. "I really have to get..."

"Would you like to know the circumstances under which you're obliged to answer my questions?" Alfonso said sternly. "Two police officers are dead, one civilian is dead, and a whole \_shit-load\_ of police equipment is destroyed. So either you cooperate with me or I'm going to have to take you in for obstruction of justice. Understood?"

Barney nodded.

"Good," Alfonso said. He turned his head, surveying the waiting room, full of women, children, and elderly people. "But, ah, not here."

Monday, 3:30 P.M.- Carrizozo Police Department, Carrizozo, New Mexico

Barney was taken to the police department in Carrizozo, into an

interrogation room. Alfonso watched through a one-way mirror while an investigator named Charlie entered the room and sat across from Barney.

"All right," the investigator said. "You know why you're here, right?"

Barney nodded.

"Good. Now, first off, I have to ask you about this particular creature. There were a dozen or so found on the truck, dead."

Charlie pushed a photograph across the table. Barney took one glance and pushed it back.

"Headcrab," he muttered. "Nasty things. Parasites. Grab your face, chew through the bone until they reach the brain. That's when they take over your body, controlling it, even if it's dead."

Charlie turned ghostly white. He cleared his throat. "Do you, ah, know where they originated?" he said.

Barney sighed. "You know, if I tell you, and a government agent ever finds me, I'll disappear off the face of the planet," he said.

"Don't worry," Charlie said. "This conversation will never leave this room." It was only a partial truth; the whole thing was being recorded, and Alfonso could hear it clearly in the other room, but it was not allowed to be shared with the public. Unless required in court, of course.

"All right," Barney said. He paused. "Black Mesa. They came from Black Mesa."

Charlie frowned. "Isn't that where you work?"

"Yes," Barney said. "I'm not exactly sure how it all happened, but one day while I was at my post, all hell seemed to break loose, and before I knew it, these headcrabs were literally everywhere. Not just headcrabs, either... all sorts of weird things that could kill you in a flash."

"Are they... some sort of crossbreed?"

"No. They're aliens."

In the other room, Alfonso sighed.

Charlie looked down at his papers uncomfortably. "Oookay," he said. "Um... let's move on to what happened in the truck."

Barney leaned forward. "I'm not bullshitting you," he said. "These things are the results of a top-secret Black Mesa experiment gone wrong, which allowed dozens upon scores upon hundreds of aliens to come to Earth. But fine. You don't have to believe me. I bet you that, in less than twenty-four hours, some bizarre phenomena are going to confirm my story."

"Let's just move on, shall we?" Charlie said. "What happened in..."

"This thing got so bad, in fact," Barney interrupted. "That the entire facility was overrun by aliens. The government sent in the military, but they were slaughtered in a matter of days, just like my colleagues. For days I managed to survive, but I and the group I survived with began to realize that it couldn't go on forever. Aliens were appearing faster and stronger than before, and we were running low on energy and ammo."

"Mr. Calhoun, I really need..."

"Don't worry, I'm getting there. Anyway, we finally made it to the surface, where we fought our way to a vehicle, which we attempted to flee in. We were almost at the abandoned military barrier at the edge of the compound when a group of strong aliens ambushed us. Our car was destroyed and my other companions were killed before the group of aliens were eliminated. I wandered in a daze past the barrier and down the road away from the compound. Finally, I noticed a trucker approaching. I flagged him down and stayed in the back, resting as well as I could.

"Suddenly, I heard those all too familiar bursts of energy, and I realized with dismay that the terror of Black Mesa was not confined to Black Mesa. I killed eleven of the headcrabs that appeared inside, but the twelfth one was allowed to go free, for I had run out of ammo. Before I could catch up to it, it had crawled into the cab. The muffled, short-lived scream of the truck driver confirmed my fear. I knew I was done for; I could not reach the cab from where I was. I hoped the truck would eventually run off the road, but luck was against me in this. The last thing I can remember was hearing your captain's call on the megaphone."

"Wait, wait," Charlie said. "Sudden bursts of energy? You mean these things appear out of \_nowhere?\_"

"That's what I've been saying, isn't it?" Barney said irritably.

Charlie shuffled through his papers, sighing. He stood up. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Calhoun," he said, before excusing himself from the room.

Charlie approached Alfonso, whose eyes were locked on Barney.

"What do you think?" Charlie said quietly.

"I think he's still a little hysterical," Alfonso said. "Making shit up to compensate what he went through."

"What do you think really happened?"

Alfonso shrugged. "I believe that thing is the result of a crossbreed experiment, like you suggested," he said. "Perhaps something \_did\_ happen at Black Mesa, but I think he's exaggerating it. I also think that when he flagged down the truck, a few of these things crawled on board and hid in the crates. You know, like wharf rats."

There was a knock at the door, and another officer appeared.

"Some kids are here, sir," he said. "I think you may want to hear what they have to say."

Monday, 3:45 P.M.- Carrizozo Police Department, Carrizozo, New Mexico

When Cal and Alex had finished their testimony, sitting across Alfonso's desk, Alfonso was still skeptical. Of course, the boys had Nathan's half-melted corpse in the back of their truck as proof, but Alfonso was more ready to charge the boys with murder than to accept this new piece of evidence as proof of the truth in Barney's story.

Finally, Barney was admitted, and heard the boys' story. When they had finished (a while before they finished, actually), he held his head in his hands.

"It's happening too soon, too fast," he muttered. "They're coming faster than I expected." He looked up to Alfonso like a dog looks to his master when he wants table scraps. "They'll be here by tomorrow. Warn the people! Set up roadblocks! Issue..."

"Get him out of here," Alfonso called to the officers by the door. When they grabbed Barney, he grew violent.

"You've got to warn the people!" he screamed. "They won't stand a chance! You won't stand a chance! They'll chew you to pieces like they did those military goons at Black..."

But his voice faded away as he was dragged out of the room to the other side of the police station, where the jail cells were. Cal and Alex watched them go, horrified.

"What's all that about?" Cal asked.

Alfonso shook his head. "That's confidential information, kid," he said. "You kids go on home. We'll take things from here."

Cal laughed forcefully. "Excuse me," he said. "Two of my friends just died, my dirtbike is soup, and my truck is damaged beyond repair. You think we can just leave without knowing what the fuck happened?"

"Look, kid," Alfonso said gruffly. "Your stuff will be covered by insurance. As for your friends, well, I'm sorry for your loss, but right now I have a hell of a lot of work to do to figure it all out. We'll let you know when we do; rather, the media will let you know. As for now, I..."

Alfonso trailed off as his phone rang. He picked it up. Several minutes later, he slammed it down on the hook. "Goddamn it," he muttered. "You kids get the hell out of here." With that, he pushed Cal and Alex out the door, and left the police station himself.

Cal and Alex sat on a bench outside the police station, absorbing the afternoon heat, watching the paramedics take... scrape, rather... Nathan off the truck and onto a van bound for the morgue.

"What a day," said Alex.

"Yeah," said Cal. "I don't think I'm ever going dirtbiking again."

"Should we, um, tell their folks?" said Alex. "Nathan and Greg, I mean."

"No," said Cal. "Let the cops do it."

They sat a few minutes longer, until the heat began to get to them. They got into the truck, and after driving Alex home, Cal parked his truck inside his parents' garage and got out. He grabbed his dad's shotgun, grabbed for the cooler, only to realize that it was now a lump of plastic fused to the truck. He shook his head and closed the garage door. It was then that he realized that he had not cried for neither Greg nor Nathan. It was so sudden, he decided, that he literally forgot to mourn.

He entered the house through the door in the garage. He carefully replaced the shotgun in its proper place. "I'm home," he shouted.

Monday, 5:20 P.M. - Eighty Miles North of Carrizozo, New Mexico

Alfonso surveyed the scene grimly. Here was an average, rundown, roadside store. Inside were two average, rundown, roadside workers. Both had "headcrabs" clinging to their heads, and both were lying on the ground, dead.

"There's more," said an investigator. "There's at least three more lying around here. They're all dead; thanks to this guy."

In a corner, talking to two police officers, was an elderly, mustached man, who looked like the sort of guy you would see playing the role of the sheriff in a western movie. He looked laid back, despite what he had just went through.

"Ah, tell that story one more time. For this guy," said one of the officers, pointing to Alfonso.

The man looked Alfonso up and down, and then repeated his story. "Well, I just pulled my vehicle over there into this here store," he said, with a heavy Southern accent. "While I was tryin' to fill up my truck, I noticed that the self-serve pump wasn't quite workin' right. So I went into the store to talk to the manager 'bout it. What do I find but these things wanderin' around! I ain't too intel'gint, officer, but I know a human when I see one, and these things weren't too human-like. Naturally, I pulled out my revolver and put a hole where they shouldn't be one in each of them. I took a look around the store, found a couple of those little scamps, and put a bullet in them, too. That's when I decided to call y'all up here."

"Headcrabs," Alfonso muttered.

"Yeah, that's what I'd call 'em, too," the man said.

Charlie, who had been listening to the story, turned to Alfonso and said, "You know, the possibility of these things traveling all these

miles up here in the burning heat..."

"What are you suggesting, Charlie?" said Alfonso.

Charlie hesitated. "Well, this guy, Barney. Maybe he's right and all about the..."

"Aliens?" Alfonso snapped. "You think he's right about the aliens? It's bad enough that there are nuts in the world who actually believe that aliens visited Roswell, but to have my own..."

"No, not the aliens," said Charlie. "The whole deal about these 'headcrabs' being able to appear out of nowhere."

Suddenly, an officer who had been sitting in the car with the radio came bursting through the door. "We've got a live one!" he shouted. "A hundred miles southwest of here! Everyone get your guns ready and head down there!"

Monday, 5:45 P.M.- Carrizozo Police Department, Carrizozo, New Mexico

The sound of clanging metal filled the cell, and for a terrifying moment, Barney was reliving his dream. It soon passed, and he noticed the guard, banging on the bars of his cell.

"Hey, you," the guard was saying, banging the bars wildly. "'Mulder.' You got a visitor."

The guard walked off, and a teenager, the one who had been telling his dirtbiking story earlier that day, appeared.

"Hello, Mr. Calhoun," the teenager said.

"Hello," Barney said. He frowned. "Kyle?"

"Cal."

"Right. Sorry." Barney stood up and stretched his arms, which had been sore ever since he woke up at the hospital. He approached the bars. "What can I do you for, Cal?"

Cal hesitated. "I, um, want to know more about those creatures," he said.

Barney looked up at the ceiling. "Should have figured," he said. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Do you really think they're aliens?"

Barney sighed. "I didn't see them come to Earth in a flying saucer, if that's what you mean," he said. "But what else can they be? That Charlie guy thinks they're the result of a crossbreed experiment. Crossbreed of \_what\_, exactly?"

"Well..." Cal thought hard. "Spiders and squid? Crabs and octopus? It could be anything out of..."

"If it was just the headcrabs, I might agree with you," Barney interrupted. "But there's more. Lots more. There are black little

humanoids with three eyes, three arms and a tail, who shoot bolts of electricity at you. There are scaly, red blobs that hang onto ceilings and wait for you to fall into their trap so they can eat you alive. There are squat, tentacled, four-legged brutes that spit acid at you and chew you up when you get close enough. Need I go on?"

"What about the one that attacked me while I was dirtbiking?" Cal said. He described the creature, but got only a blank stare from Barney.

"I haven't seen one of those," he said. "But I'm sure they're one of \_them\_. \_There are high-ranking aliens and low-ranking aliens. The ones I've fought were mostly low-ranking, thank God. Maybe that thing was high-ranking."

Cal felt like a fool talking seriously about aliens. He looked around at the other cells, to see if the other inmates were listening in, but they were mostly having conversations of their own.

Barney leaned in close. "Now, listen," he said softly. "Those creatures will probably be here by tomorrow. If not, it will be because they decided to build up their army first. Let a few more warp to Earth, you know. But they will \_be\_ here. Sooner or later."

"What do you expect me to do?" Cal said defensively.

"Just... be prepared. Know what you're about to face." Barney then began describing each of the aliens he had encountered, and the nicknames they had received. The grunt. The headcrab. The mawman. The bullsquid. The barnacle. The vortigaunt. The houndeye. The garg. When he finished, he continued, "I'm not even sure if they will attack Carrizozo first. It could be any of the surrounding cities. Maybe weird things are happening elsewhere in New Mexico. But when they \_do\_ come, Carrizozo doesn't stand a chance."

Monday, 6:50 P.M.- Twenty miles west of Roswell, New Mexico

The sun had begun to set by the time they got there. When they did, Alfonso stepped out of the police car and stared, dumbfounded. The creature jutting out of the ground looked, acted and sounded more frightening than anything Hollywood could ever produce. It looked like a giant snake, with a large, sharp beak, hard exoskeleton, and a body so strong and sleek that it could hold its giant head high off the ground without resting. Occasionally, it would snap its head at the ground with cobra-like speed, making all the officers who watched jump.

An officer in front of Alfonso drew his pistol and advanced slowly. Alfonso put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't do anything fancy," he said. "Look what that thing did to the last guy who tried that."

The officer looked at the ground below the creature, where a wide splatter of dried blood was. Even in the fading sunlight, he could make out human body parts that had been dashed to pieces. There were even bodies of vultures nearby, who had been foolish enough to try to nab a piece of meat.

"There's a car wreck back there," said Jason, the officer who had



been at the site first, said. "Apparently, this guy wandered out of his car to look for help. He left his wife in there."

"She alive?" Alfonso said.

"No. Brain hemorrhage. The car was upside down, and..."

"Yeah, I get it," Alfonso said. He waved his arm at the creature. "Has anyone tried shooting this thing?"

"Yep," said Jason. "That skin is tough as hell. Even if a bullet did manage to penetrate the skin, it would take a hundred to down a creature of that size."

"Then what we need is a sedative," Alfonso said. "Put the thing out, then do what we can to kill it. I don't think we could contain it. I mean, look what it can do to the ground!"

The creature snapped again, putting a foot-deep crack in the ground. It moaned mournfully.

"All right," said Jason. "I have some sleeping gas in my car. Hang on."

The sleeping gas was administered, and all the surrounding officers put oxygen masks on. It took a while, but the creature finally fell limp. The officers cheered quietly.

Jason took a hatchet from his car and started hacking at the neck. David took out a knife and bent down to help him.

"This is harder than cutting metal!" Jason remarked, taking the hatchet high in the air before slamming it down into the impenetrable skin. David, meanwhile, had stopped trying to saw the neck, and proceeded to stabbing it.

Suddenly, the creature lifted its head with a moan and drew back. David scrambled away, but Jason did not move fast enough to save his leg; the creature sliced it in half. Alfonso rushed in and dragged a howling Jason away before the creature came back for a second strike. The police force's initial response was to shoot the creature. Every officer, except Alfonso and Jason, was shooting countless rounds into the creature. It moaned angrily and, reaching farther than any of them expected it to be able to, cut the front of the nearest police car all the way through. It then returned to striking the ground nearby.

"We're going to have to get some more powerful weapons here," Alfonso muttered. "In the meantime, put up a roadblock. And put a splint on this guy's leg. We need to get him to a hospital."

Monday, 7:43 P.M. - Carrizozo, New Mexico

Cal lay sprawled across his bed, listening to the robotic drone of the TV across his room. He finally muted it, and continued laying there with his thoughts.

Earlier that day, when he arrived home from dirtbiking, his mother wondered why he was home so early. It was hard answering the series of questions that followed, and when he was done, he felt even worse

than he had before. He couldn't think of his friends, so his thoughts drifted to the creature itself.

Cal began considering Barney's suggestion. He had never seriously believed in aliens, but he had never seriously doubted them, either. He usually only entertained the possibility of their existence for a day or two after watching alien sighting documentaries, but all in all, aliens existed only for tourist traps, drunks, and fishermen. Until now.

Cal suddenly realized that he was exhausted. He shut off the TV and lay down on his bed. As he fell asleep before 8 P.M. for the first time in ten years, he decided that, before the end of the week came, Barney's theory would either be confirmed or denied.

### 3. Foreseen Consequences

Tuesday, 5:29 A.M. - Carrizozo, New Mexico

Cal awoke to what he thought was the TV. He heard shouts, screams, and gunshots, all quiet, as if they came from far off. When he remembered that he had shut off the TV before going to sleep, he sprung out of bed, threw open his window, and looked outside.

At first he saw nothing. It was just his neighborhood, empty as it always was this early in the morning. The shouts were coming closer. Soon, Cal saw a group of men running, turning the corner into his block. When he looked closer, he noticed a detail that filled his blood with adrenalin: they were all carrying guns.

Moments later, the object of the group's flight came into view. A gargantuan, biped beast, at least as tall as his house, with terrifying claws and a round head tipped with an open jaw, it was the perfect specimen for Barney's description of a garg. It raised its hands, producing a stream of fire that flowed from its body, cutting down every one of the men in their path. The garg roared; Cal's adrenal glands pumped harder. A dog came running out of a nearby house and barked at the monster. The garg growled, and with another wave of fire, incinerated the dog and sent several nearby cars flying into the house, knocking it to the ground. The wave moved on, burning trees, denting cars, and shattering windows in its wake.

Cal's bedroom window shattered in his face. He scrambled away, through his bedroom door and into the upstairs hallway. He turned his head towards his parents' room, and as he did so, noticed that the bedroom was empty. He climbed down the stairs, shouting, "Mom? Dad?"

Suddenly, the front of the house exploded, and his mom's jeep came crashing into the house. The garg growled, and for the first time Cal realized how loud and deep the growl was close-up.

"Oh, shit." He turned abruptly, falling on his own rubber legs but recovering quickly. He flew down the hall, threw open the back door, dashed through the backyard, and leaped over the fence, all the while praying that the monster did not catch sight of him.

He ducked into a dog house and waited. A few minutes later, he heard another crash, but it was much farther off. He got out of the dog

house, climbed back over the fence, and walked into his front yard. The garg was nowhere to be seen.

Cal heard a scream, but it didn't sound human. He turned, and saw a group of three headcrabs, three live headcrabs, crawling his way. He stared at them with curiosity, Suddenly the nearest of them jumped, and what a jump! The headcrab cleared the distance between the group and Cal in a heartbeat, giving Cal just enough time to save his face by turning his head and getting a nick in his ear. He fled to the house before any of them could come in for a second attack, but the headcrabs were already crawling his way. He grabbed for whatever weapon he could find, coming up with a yard-long piece of wood from the wall destroyed by the thrown jeep.

When the first headcrab attacked, Cal swung the stick like a baseball bat, knocking the beast down in midair. He stabbed it in the mouth to make sure it was dead; he heard a sickening squish within, and the end of the stick came out dark green. When the others were nearby, he did the same to them, only on the third headcrab, he missed the first time, and it left a cut in his left arm. He turned and beat the headcrab until it was motionless.

He stood like that for several moments, breathing heavily. He became aware that the neighborhood was no longer quite, that there were screams, gunshots, and crashes coming from every direction.

He went to the group of men, laying dead in the middle of the road. Their bodies were burned, but their weapons seemed intact. He picked up a shotgun and a pistol, and took ammunition from the others. As he did so, he turned one man's body over.

It was his father.

He fell backwards, putting his hand to his mouth to prevent a pain-filled scream. His father's burned body lay burned before his eyes. This time, unlike when his friends were killed, he did cry. He let the tears stream down his face to ease the pain, but they did not do so. For fifteen minutes, he did not move.

At last, a gurgling sound from down the road was brought to his attention. He quickly wiped away his tears and aimed his shotgun at the source of the sound. There, he saw a "vortigaunt," as Barney called it, already building up its electrical attack. Cal threw himself to the ground. His face struck the hard, black asphalt as a bolt of seething electrical energy passed overhead. He turned and scrambled away as the vortigaunt prepared for another attack. He hid behind a nearby SUV, and moments later, the vortigaunt's electrical attack blew out the windows and stripped away the roof.

Cal rolled out of his hiding place, aimed the shotgun, and fired. His aim was true; the vortigaunt fell with a final death gurgle.

When he heard similar gurgles pop up from around the neighborhood, as well as reverberating thumps of the garg's footsteps, he realized that the shotgun's report had attracted more aliens to his block.

I can't stay here, he thought grimly, climbing into the SUV through the shattered window. Greg had taught him how to hotwire a car once; Cal hoped he could still remember how to do it.

The first of the vortigaunts came sauntering around the street corner, and Cal's stomach tied up in a knot. Fortunately, it didn't seem to see him, but it appeared to be on the trail of a scent. Could it be him?

\_No,\_ Cal thought. \_There are dozens of other people on this block. It could be any one of them.\_

Cal suddenly realized that, aside from the group of running men, he hadn't \_seen\_ anyone else. How could they not wake up from all the noise?

As he thought over it, the vortigaunt was joined by several of its companions. Then, while he was still fiddling with the wires, a creature that fit Barney's description of a houndeye came playfully around the corner, dancing around the vortigaunts, who swat at it in annoyance. The houndeye stopped darting about, and seemed to be looking at something. Cal realized that it was he.

The roofless, windowless SUV sputtered to life. Cal got in the driver's seat and put it in drive, just as the houndeye came dashing his way. The vortigaunts didn't seem to notice, yet.

Cal did a U-turn, running over the lawn of the owner and nearly knocking over the mailbox. Cal saw the houndeye running towards him but didn't turn around for one simple reason: he saw the garg in his rear view mirror.

Cal was thrown forward, then bounced upward twice as he ran over the beast. This time the vortigaunts took notice. They lined up along the road, as if forming a roadblock, and began charging their electric attacks. Cal swerved the SUV at the last minute, watched as three bolts of bright energy streamed past, inches from the driver's seat door. He stepped on the gas, easily passing fifty miles an hour. The vortigaunts were starting to charge their attacks again, but it was too late. Cal ran over two of them, turned the corner with a screech, and was gone.

He sped down the road, aware that a vehicle he had stolen minutes ago already had shattered windows and a shattered windshield, a crumpled fender and hood, and a missing roof. If he ran down any more monsters, his vehicle would likely be unable to drive. But if it came to that, he would have no choice. He had to leave town, but there was something he had to do first.

As he drove, Cal realized that the neighborhood was much worse than he had thought at first. Fences were knocked down. Windows were shattered. Blood, both human and alien, was splattered all over the sidewalks. Cars were overturned, and a few actually looked like they had exploded. More than once, Cal witnessed a human corpse, still in its pajamas, laying face down on the street, its back torn open.

Suddenly, a group of five houndeyes dashed across the street, but they were thankfully far enough for Cal not to worry about running over. They ran into an open door of a house of a kid that Cal knew all too well: Alex.

Cal turned, becoming worried for a moment that the SUV would actually flip over, and parked on Alex's lawn, a few feet from the open door.

He leaped out of the absent roof, loading his shotgun in the process, and went in.

When he entered the living room, he discovered that Alex apparently had the situation under control. He created a barricade out of an overturned sofa and was crouched behind it, popping off paintballs at the aliens that kept coming in, attracted by the noise. Alex's paintball gun was a powerful one, and at close range, it did the job. Cal watched as Alex shot one of the houndeyes in the eye, bursting it and entering its brain, when it fell to the ground, dead. Cal raised his shotgun and took care of the others.

When all the aliens were dead, Cal approached the sofa and helped Alex to his feet. Alex was trembling, as did Cal when he first encountered the aliens.

"You all right?" Cal asked.

Alex nodded. "Considering," he mumbled. Then louder, "What the fuck is happening? I mean, one thing I was dreaming about being with two women, and the next, I wake up to monsters shooting electricity through my neighbor's chest!"

"Where are your parents?" Cal said suddenly.

Alex frowned. "I don't know," he said. "When I woke up, they were gone, and a few of those things were wandering around in here." He pointed to the carcass of a vortigaunt; it, like the houndeye, had taken a paintball through the eye.

"Same here," said Cal. He beckoned to Alex, and the two made their way to Cal's truck. "It's like we woke up in an apocalyptic war zone. But you know what the scary part is?"

"What?" said Alex, taking Cal's shotgun and riding shotgun.

"It feels like the war is almost over."

Tuesday, 5:40 A.M.- Carrizozo Police Department, Carrizozo, New Mexico

Things were looking far differently at the heart of the city. The streets were full of gargs, bullsquids, grunts and vortigaunts, all of which were cutting down citizens, wrecking cars, and devastating the city itself. A block from the police department, a man sat wedged into a corner of a building, firing a revolver at the beasts, before a garg whacked him with a streetlight, dashing his brains out onto the sidewalk.

Inside, Alfonso and the remaining police officers had barricaded themselves inside, shooting any alien that attacked. Already, three of their own lay dead.

Alfonso remembered it vividly. It began an hour ago; he had been working late, of course, on the case of the strange creature that had made its home out of a piece of the road outside the city. While he was sitting at his desk, he heard steady, repetitive thumping, like an excited dog's tail hitting carpet. When he stepped outside to look, he saw a dark shape against the sleeping city. When he looked closer, there were more shapes behind it. Hundreds more. Before he

knew it, the city had become a war zone, and the unwitting townsfolk, hardly soldiers awake, were sitting ducks when awoken suddenly.

A group of seven vortigaunts were running down the street when they noticed the officers inside the station. They simultaneously charged their electric attacks, but the officers only had time to gun down five of them before the attacks were released. The first came through the last glass window and struck an overturned desk, destroying it and the officer who hid behind it. The second destroyed a part of the wall, and clipped another desk. Charlie, who was hiding behind it, gave a cry, and scrunched up his body to fit behind the remaining part of the desk. He reached across the blood-stained, glass covered floor to an officer's corpse, felt around his belt, and grabbed the radio.

A sound like buzzing insects filled the air, and a flying object burrowed into Charlie's outreached arm and came bursting in a fountain of blood through the other side. He screamed, but this scream only attracted more of the alien insects. Alfonso watched as half a dozen or so pierced his body, leaving behind holes through which blood oozed out, soaking Charlie's uniform and the carpet beneath.

Alfonso looked up from behind his desk, and saw a grunt, who was shooting insects at the officers. He emptied five cartridges into the beast before it fell with a thud.

Another officer had taken Charlie's example, and was grabbing for his own radio. "All units!" he said, shouting over the screams and explosions that came from outside. "All units! Come in! Code red! All units report to..."

"Shut up and shoot!" Alfonso shouted.

The officer ignored him, and continued rambling into the radio. "This is a code red," he said. "Officers down, shots fired, backup needed. All units..."

"All units?" Alfonso screamed, reloading his shotgun. He motioned with the shotgun to the city outside. "\_There's your fucking units!\_"

Outside, an officer was running wildly down the street, striking at a headcrab that clung to his skull. He ran until a grunt shot five bees through his chest. He fell stiffly to the ground, while the headcrab released him and hopped away. Nearby, a police car, sirens wailing, was swerving and speeding at well above seventy miles an hour, until a garg jabbed at it with one tremendous claw. The strike shattered the driver's side window and knocked out the driver. The car continued speeding, heading straight for the police station.

"Look out!" Alfonso screamed.

He and the two others leaped out of the way. The police car came crashing into the building, taking down whatever was left of the front wall, smashed the desk barriers, and pummeled into the offices behind. When it stopped, only the back bumper and lights were sticking out, and the car was overturned.

"Evac!" Alfonso shouted.

The officers didn't seem to comprehend, until they saw Alfonso leaping out onto the sidewalk outside. The police car exploded violently, and half of the police station was destroyed instantly. The other half was left to burn.

Alfonso scampered down the sidewalk to the compound at the side, where all the police cars were parked. Along the way, he shot two headcrabs and a mawman. He burst into the compound, tried the first car he saw, found it locked, turned to the sidewalk, saw two grunts fast approaching, and shot off the door handle. As he hopped into the front seat, he finally got a hold of his keys, thrust them into the ignition, and started the car. He sped out of the compound, breaking the left headlight on another car's bumper in the process, entered the street, and headed west, towards the city limits, at ninety miles per hour.

Tuesday, 5:46 A.M.- Carrizozo, New Mexico

"Holy shit, look at this place!"

Alex had his head out the window, watching the downtown area grow closer, and the level of chaos grow higher. The aliens were everywhere, busy wreaking havoc on the small town, killing the occasional survivor of their previous carnage, and attacking speeding cars.

"Better get your head back in here, Alex," Cal said. "Or one of those headcrabs are gonna make breakfast out of it."

Alex drew closer in, aiming his shotgun instead through the broken windshield. Thankfully, most of the creatures had not noticed their coming yet. But they both knew that wouldn't last long.

"Watch out!" Alex shouted.

A vortigaunt had suddenly appeared in the road, and was charging its electrical attack. Cal swerved, hitting the sidewalk and nearly losing the left mirror to the passing walls.

"Don't just sit there, shoot!" Cal cried.

Alex turned a full 180 degrees and fired, striking the vortigaunt in the chest moments before its electrical attack would be unleashed.

"This is it," Cal said. "The police station is around this... shit."

Cal turned the corner sharply, allowing himself and Alex a clear view of the police station. It was engulfed in flames. Cal drove the SUV nearer to it.

"What are you doing?" Alex shouted. "You're taking us into the goddamned fray!"

"I have to get that Barney guy," Cal said calmly.

Alex looked at him, then at the police station, then back at him. "Are you kidding?" he said. "That guy is fucking \_barbecue\_."

Look!"

"The cells are in the back. The fire might not have reached him yet. Now, hang on. We're going to do some more crazy driving."

Cal turned the vehicle into the police station, driving through fire walls and smashing down glowing pieces of wood, while Alex screamed and held his hands over his head. Cal didn't stop until the SUV had made it through the burning part of the building and came to a stop against the far wall with a bump. Cal was right; the jail cells were not on fire, although the place was already heavy with smoke. He leapt out of the vehicle and began searching the cells.

"Here he is!" Cal shouted. Barney Calhoun lay unconscious on the floor near the bars; he had apparently been trying to get out.

"Here, I'll shoot out the lock," Alex said, loading the shotgun.

"No!" Cal said. "We'll need the ammo. You go find some keys, I'll ready our escape route."

Alex nodded and took off. Cal turned, hopped back into the SUV, and put it in reverse. He backed up until he was almost at the heart of the fire. He put it in drive, exhaled loudly, and pushed down on the gas.

He didn't go too fast for his own personal safety, but it was fast enough for the air bag to pop out in his face, and for a section of the wall level with the bumper to break. He tried putting it in reverse again, but the car wouldn't go. Instead, he got out, pushed the SUV back, and began clearing away bricks to make a good-sized escape route.

Alex came running with a set of keys. He unlocked Barney's cell, and the two of them dragged Barney out through the escape hole. They dragged him until they were a good distance from the police station. Cal turned and looked at the hole in the wall, where thin streams of smoke were flowing out into the early dawn sky. Next to him, Alex was coughing forcefully.

"Should... we... try and... get the other... inmates?" Alex wheezed.

A report sounded from within, and the wall above the hole broke outwards. The SUV had exploded. Cal shook his head sadly.

The two broke into the police car compound, only to find an alien grunt inside. They hid behind a car, taking shots at the brute, and returning quickly to their hiding space to avoid the "bees" the brute shot at them. Four rounds later, the alien grunt fell. Cal and Alex broke into a nearby police car, ignoring the alarm that wailed. Cal quickly hotwired the car, placed Barney in the back and Alex in the front, and then drove off.

#### 4. Trough of High Frequency

Tuesday, 6:31 A.M.- Forty Miles Northwest of Carrizozo, New



Mexico

For half an hour of driving down the desolate country road neither Cal nor Alex spoke. Both sat staring intensely at the landscape, gradually turning from a dark blue, to a pale beige, to a light tan as the sun rose behind them, playing and replaying the images of the previous hour in their minds. It was Alex who finally broke the silence.

"Where to now?" he said.

Cal shrugged slightly. "Albuquerque," he said. "We gotta warn people of what these things can do. I mean, Christ, these things tore down the city before sunup!"

"Do you really think they will believe us?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, the same kinds of strange events have been happening near Albuquerque as were happening near Carrizozo. In any case, we'll have a very short time for them to do something about it."

Alex sighed. "So we'll be the Barney Calhoun of Albuquerque, then?"

"All right," Cal said, irritably. "Listen. I'll bet you anything that we're not the only ones to escape. There's probably already someone there frantically trying to get the authorities to believe his alien story. Maybe they'll pass him off as a lunatic at first, but when we show up with the same story, they'll have to believe us. Then they may have time to call in the National Guard or something."

"And what will they be able to accomplish?"

Cal shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

Tuesday, 6:36 A.M.- Forty-eight Miles Northwest of Carrizozo, New Mexico

Barney crept through an empty corridor of an old prison, wielding a crowbar that he had taken from a maintenance room. The walls around him were plastered with either old blood or rust; it was becoming hard to tell which was which. The stink of rotting corpses filled his nostrils, and the screams of tortured...

"Wait a minute," Barney said aloud. "I remember this. It's happened before."

No, it hasn't, his mind said.

Barney frowned, but did not stop running. He looked down at the crowbar in his hand. Where had he gotten it from?

"It's different," he said.

From what? replied the mind.

"From the first time it happened," Barney said.

\_It feels different because there never \_was\_ a first time.\_

"Then what do I remember?"

Barney reached the corridor where he remembered meeting a group of vortigaunts. The voices were raised; they had apparently heard him talking to himself. He felt blood rush to his face out of embarrassment.

"What happened next?" he whispered to himself.

Then he remembered. A vortigaunt had sneaked up behind him, distracting him while the others charged their electrical attacks. Barney spun around, crowbar raised for attack.

It was not a vortigaunt that stood there, but a grunt, with its sinister-looking bee gun aimed at Barney's heart. As the alien bees pierced his body and his mind passed from existence, his last thoughts repeated the question back to him: \_What do I remember?\_

He awoke with limbs flailing wildly as if to fend off the bees that still buzzed about, eager to sink into his soft flesh. He just as soon winced in pain as his limbs struck metal and glass. He sat upright, saw a metal mesh in front of his face, and panicked at the thought of being back in the prison of his dreams.

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?" he screamed, slamming his fists on the mesh, feeling it reverberate but not give way. "Let me out of here! Let me \_out!!\_"

He kicked the window by his feet, smashing the glass. He scrambled to climb out of the gaping hole, and that was when Cal pulled the police car to the side of the road.

Cal got out of the car, slamming the door. "Are you out of your mind?" he said to Barney, whose left foot was already sticking out of the window. "Climbing out of a car going over seventy?"

Barney looked around him, then tentatively pulled his foot into the car. Cal opened the door for him. By this time, Alex was already standing outside.

"I'm sorry," Barney mumbled. "I must've been dreaming. Where am I?"

Cal looked around. "Middle of Nowhere, New Mexico," he said. "Actually, we're headed for Albuquerque. You were right, you know. The aliens had built up their army and invaded Carrizozo."

Barney leaned against the police car, sighing. "I know," he said. "I was there. I remember everything, right up until the jail cells filled up with smoke."

Cal and Alex exchanged glances.

"Listen, Alex and I were wondering about something," Cal said. "Suppose we make it to Albuquerque, warn everybody about the invasion, and they call in the National Guard. Do you think \_they\_ could stop the aliens?"

Barney thought about it for a moment. Then he said, "Let's leave it at this. When the accident at Black Mesa was reported, the government sent in hordes of the most elite military forces to 'correct' the problem. In less than forty-eight hours, most of the military force was destroyed, and the rest had fled."

"\_Then what the hell are we supposed to do?\_" Cal screamed, suddenly angry. When he heard his own voice echo off the distant mesas, he realized that he wasn't angry at Barney's dismal approach. He was angry because he was terrified.

"Whatever we do," Barney said at last, "it will no longer be an offensive maneuver. And we will do it alone."

Tuesday, 7:29 A.M.- Twenty Miles Southeast of Albuquerque, New Mexico

KKRM was a talk radio station local to Albuquerque and the surrounding towns. The host, Bob Shoemaker, was a radical liberal, who spoke mainly to the young people of New Mexico. It wasn't big, of course, but it had its share of listeners in the city. Many urged Bob to try becoming national.

It was at this radio station, located in the desert outskirts of the city, that a police car with a smashed left headlight and a dented front bumper arrived an hour after dawn, when the sands were beginning to warm. Alfonso got out of the car and strode swiftly into the station.

"I need to speak with Mr. Shoemaker," Alfonso said to the receptionist.

The receptionist smiled politely. "I'm sorry," she said. "We do not start tours for another..."

"Perhaps my uniform wasn't clear enough," Alfonso said of his grimy blue suit. He whipped out his badge. "I need to speak with Mr. Shoemaker. Now."

The receptionist nodded. "Right that way."

Alfonso navigated the corridors until he reached the studio. Behind the glass, he saw Bob Shoemaker, ranting passionately into the microphone. Alfonso could hear him clearly in the speakers above.

"...New Mexicans," Bob was saying. "As you're on your way to work, ask yourself: Is this normal weather? Is it usually this hot? Don't blame random weather patterns, folks, for global warming is in full swing. That's right, scientists estimate that within..."

Alfonso tried the door, but found it locked. He knocked on the glass window. Bob looked up with a frown. His frown disappeared and his eyes bulged when he saw Alfonso holding up a shimmering badge, impatiently.

"More on this when we get back," Bob said. He pushed a button, and removed his headset, while a recording said, "You're listening to KKRM; New Mexico's liberal voice."

Bob opened the door. "Something I can do for you, officer?" he said, somewhat defensively.

"I need to use your microphone," Alfonso said simply.

Bob scoffed. "What?" he said. "Listen, buddy, this is private property, and you can't just come in and..."

"It's an emergency," Alfonso said. "I need to make a public announcement."

"Get a warrant, asshole," Bob growled. He turned and threw the door, but Alfonso stopped it with his foot. Then suddenly, instinctively, he felt his hand reach for his pistol, hold it at waist level, and cock it. Bob's eyes bulged again.

"I need. To use. Your microphone." Alfonso spoke deliberately, almost insanely. Bob probably thought he was.

Alfonso sat in the chair, put on the headset, and waited for the commercials to end. When they did, and the signal for him to speak came, Alfonso cleared his throat and spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "This is Lieutenant Alfonso Lopez of the Carrizozo Police Department. I'm sorry to interrupt your radio show, but I have an emergency announcement to make. Hours earlier, at the aforementioned city of Carrizozo, an attack occurred. No, this was not a terrorist attack, and no, it's not a joke. These attackers were of an unknown species. Aliens, if you will. They attacked swiftly and efficiently, catching most people in their sleep. We have reason to believe that they are moving on to other nearby cities, including Albuquerque. Do not panic. They are not likely to move on for another forty-eight hours." This part Alfonso made up; it was almost certain that the creatures would reach Albuquerque before then, but the last thing he wanted was mass hysteria. "Instead, alert the local authorities, for I may not be able to do so. Again, this is not a joke. That is all."

Alfonso removed the headset and got out of the chair. Bob, after a moment of stunned silence, returned to his position. He said, "Uh, Lieutenant Lopez would like to remind everybody that this really is an emergency, but that you must not panic. Also, if any of you would like to ask Lieutenant Lopez some questions, feel free to call in."

With that, Bob returned to whatever issue he was ranting about, while Alfonso stood in a corner of the studio, interested only in hearing someone call. Five minutes passed before Bob took a brief commercial break. During this time, he removed his headphones and whispered, "Don't worry. We take calls during the commercial break so we can filter out all the weirdos."

He put the headset back on and returned to the mike. For another ten minutes, he ranted almost without breath. The familiar recording and chime came, and no calls had come. Again, he removed the headset and turned towards Alfonso, but this time he wore an expression of puzzlement.

"This is weird," he whispered. "We're usually flooded with calls every commercial break."

"Maybe it's taking them some time to absorb everything I said," Alfonso whispered back.

Bob nodded and returned to his place. For the next ten minutes, he talked about the most minimalistic issues, without the heart he had put into his earlier rants. Apparently, Bob didn't usually go this long without someone calling in to argue his points. Another commercial break came, and no one had called.

Bob turned towards Alfonso. "Do you really think they..." He trailed off. Alfonso was gone.

Tuesday, 7:35 A.M.- Twenty-five Miles Southeast of Albuquerque, New Mexico

"Shit, we're out of gas."

For nearly another hour, Cal, Alex and Barney had been driving nonstop towards Albuquerque. Now, twenty-five miles from the city, Cal was beginning to notice that the red needle was getting dangerously close to the "E" on the dashboard.

"There's a gas station two miles from here," Alex noted.

Cal drove the police car for the required two miles, then, seeing a solitary gas station at the side of the road, pulled it over. He got out, approached the self-serve unit, and patted himself down.

"Damn," he said. "Left my wallet at home. You got money, Alex?"

Alex shook his head. Cal looked at Barney.

"My wallet's in my uniform pants, which are at the hospital," he said.

"I'll go inside the store and see if we can barter," Alex said, walking off. "I mean, we are the only three survivors of that invasion."

Cal stood with his hands in his pockets, reading the warning signs idly.

"Do you smell cigarette smoke?" Barney said, sniffing the air.

Cal shrugged. "It's a gas station," he said. "Gas stations always smell like smoke."

"Hey, ladies, look at this!" Alex shouted from within the store.

Cal and Barney ran inside the store, where Alex was pointing at the counter. Behind it, in the racks of cigarettes, was a large steaming crater, which smelt strongly of tobacco smoke. Cal peered over the counter. On the floor, with a large, black-rimmed hole in its chest, was the body of the store owner.

"Vortigaunt," Barney whispered, instinctively putting his hand to his side, where his gun holster would be.

Cal looked around nervously. "Where is it now?"

There was a crackle of electricity outside. The three glanced outside in time to see a bolt of green strike the gas pump. The pump exploded, pieces of concrete flying sky high as the tanks beneath ignited, gallons of gas feeding the bright orange fireball until it was satisfied, and the entire thing shrank into dark black smoke. Through pockets in the smoke, they saw the remains of the police car, little more than flakes of metal.

"Ah, hell," Cal said weakly.

"The shotgun was inside," Alex mumbled.

"Bloody, bloody hell."

There was a sound of crackling electricity from somewhere outside the gas station, which had a much shorter duration than the vortigaunts' attacks. Barney turned sharply. More followed. Two at a time, at first, then three, then five. Barney crouched behind the counter, feeling for a weapon. He found a pistol with one magazine. He, Cal and Alex hid behind the counter, expecting to be swarmed by vortigaunts. There were none; the first one had died in the explosion it caused. Instead, they heard distant wails. Barney peered over the counter, then shrank back.

"What are they?" Cal whispered.

"I don't know," Barney whispered back. "I've never seen them before."

"Well, what do they look like?"

"Like floating, white blobs. With legs. And eyes."

They began discerning sharp bursts from all around the gas station. Suddenly, a nearby window burst, and one of the creatures floated inside.

"Jesus!" Alex shouted upon sighting it.

Barney lifted the pistol and fired five times. The blob dropped dead.

"We don't have enough ammo for all of them," Barney said. "We'll have to run for it."

"Are you kidding?!" Cal cried. "We'll never..."

"We will if we split up," Barney said. "Now, judging from those sounds, they attack with small orbs of energy at long intervals. Avoiding these attacks will be much easier than avoiding the vortigaunts' attacks."

Cal listened to the repetitive bursts. "Ok," he said. "I'm going through the back door."

Alex nodded. "I'm going through the side window."

Barney looked at his pistol. "Since I have a weapon, I'll go through the front door." He shifted his body until he was in a kneeling position. "On three. One... two... three!"

From that moment on, everything was a blur.

Cal was on his feet, running for the back of the store, tackling the back door, only to find it ajar, tripping over himself on the two steps leading to the ground, recovering quickly, and dashing madly. Above, six of the creatures were whirling around like vultures, taking pot shots at him. He glanced to the right, where he saw Alex hopping out of a window and running south. Behind him, he heard the shots of Barney's pistol until Barney ran out of ammo, and all Cal heard from then on were the burst of energy.

To the south, one of the creatures had swerved with surprising speed into Alex's path. Alex scrambled to turn around, but only managed to trip on his own feet. The creature that had appeared in front of him released an electric orb destined for Alex's head. Alex shielded himself with his arm, and moments later, found it burned away to the joint of his elbow. The screams that followed would haunt Cal forever.

Cal did well for a while, running fast enough for the orbs to fall just short of their target. He didn't notice when a final burst of energy happened above, and a new creature was descending, right into Cal's path. When Cal saw it, he nearly fell backwards onto the hot sand. The creature that appeared before him was a larger version of the ones chasing him. It had many twisted appendages and a face below its massive brain that appeared almost human. It held its appendages in front of its face, creating a shimmering ring that descended onto Cal's trembling body. All the while, the creature spoke in a deep, reverberating voice. Cal thought for a terrifying moment right before his body was vaporized that he knew the words coming from the creature.

"\_IIIIIIIII... Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaave.... Yyyyyyyyyooooooooouuuuuuuu...  
Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaave.....  
Yyyyyyyyyyyyyooooooooouuuuuuuu..."\_

Tuesday, 7:46 A.M.- Albuquerque, New Mexico

For a while, Cal knew nothing but darkness.

Within moments, his senses drifted back into place. First touch; the entire front of his body was touching a rough surface, so he must've been laying down. Next, smell; he smelt concrete, which accounted for the rough surface. Taste; he tasted a hint of blood in his mouth. Hearing; he heard nothing but the wind blowing.

Finally, his sight came back. At first it was blurry, but gradually, he could make out a white, creamy surface. He looked up, and saw nothing but sky. He got painfully to his feet, and looked around. There was no horizon. It meant only one thing. He was on top of a building

Cal looked around at the top of the building, then at the sky. It felt like the sun was in the same position as it was at the gas station, so he hadn't gone far. Was this Albuquerque?

\_Only one way to make sure,\_ he thought. He shuffled to the edge of the building, and what he saw made him gasp.

The city below was indeed Albuquerque, but not as he had ever known it. The streets were completely devoid of human life. Instead, toppled cars, unconstrained fires, splatters of blood, and bodies lay scattered all over the city. In the skies, giant alien creatures, which resembled manta rays, floated silently overhead. In the streets, scores of alien grunts and vortigaunts stood in ranks, while gargers maintained the ranks, and mawmen, headcrabs and bullsquids roamed freely. The occasional white flying blob circled the city.

There was a sharp burst of energy from behind. Cal spun, fists raised, to see a solitary vortigaunt.

\_Oh, shit,\_ he thought. \_I don't know how I survived that thing before, but\_ \_now, I'm royally fucked.\_

But the vortigaunt did not attack. It cocked its head, scratching it once, like a human would. It looked into Cal's eyes, spewing forth some gurgled language. Cal suddenly realized that it was speaking English.

"\_Understand me you do?\_" it said, its voice deep-throated and guttural.

Cal nodded. The vortigaunt did not appear to understand the gesture, so Cal said, "Yes."

"\_Good,\_ " said the vortigaunt. \_"Then you hear what I say.\_ " The creature looked over its shoulder, then continued. "\_Spare you is for one reason, and that be you is messenger for inferiors.\_ \_Humans, you say yourself.\_ \_We see you as you go in move machine, our sky scouts see you. We stop you at there place. We kill weak inferior. We bring you to here place. Now, message. You see this place? We is do to every place on you planet. To stop us is you cannot do. We first conquest for Xen, many you humans try, many die. Others go run, we let them. Is not necessary to die every inferior. Is necessary to establish base here only.\_ "

"Black Mesa," Cal said.

"\_Is what inferiors call, yes,\_ " the vortigaunt said. "\_Base establish, we free conquer rest of inferior place.\_ \_We do now.\_ "

"Wait, wait," Cal said suddenly. "You came first to establish a base, then to conquer the rest of our planet? I... I thought your arrival was an accident! At Black Mesa!"

The vortigaunt was silent, as if thinking. "\_We come by stone,\_ " it said. "\_Stone make portal, we come. We see you planet many year. We decide you planet adequate for we need. We send stone. Inferiors find stone, bring stone Black Mesa place. Inferiors underestimate stone power. Inferiors destroy Black Mesa place. We come the same.\_ "

"Adequate for what needs?" Cal asked carefully.



"\_Mines and slaves,\_" the vortigaunt said simply. "\_You planet much metal have, much fuel. Xen make mines you planet. Xen make slaves you inferiors.\_"

Cal took a swing at the vortigaunt, but moments before he connected, a shimmering green ring appeared between them, and Cal fell into it. He felt the same feelings of nothingness, followed by a gradual trickle of senses coming to him, followed by the feeling of weightlessness, of falling freely, with wind whipping his hair and his clothes. He looked down, and found himself falling to the streets below. But he hardly fell ten feet when another portal appeared below him, taking him back to the top of the building. He fell hard, chipping his front tooth on the concrete.

"\_Do not act you against we, inferior,\_" the vortigaunt said. Cal sensed anger in its guttural words. "\_We control portals. Nihilanth create portals any place. Nihilanth bring you here place. Die Nihilanth you cannot. Many Nihilanth, many place Xen. One inferior die Nihilanth, many replace. We want, we create portal here take you portal here. You go portal, portal take you here infinity.\_"

Cal got the idea. "So if you wanted to, you could kill me anywhere."

The vortigaunt cocked its head. "\_We no want die you,\_" it said. "\_We want you tell inferiors surrender. We conquer inferiors planet, you become slave. You work mines. Escape you cannot.\_"

A portal appeared behind the vortigaunt. It looked one last time at Cal, then turned and walked into the portal. Cal heard the sound of a portal opening from behind, and turned to meet it.

## 5. Emergency Procedures

Tuesday, 7:47 A.M.- Thirty Miles North of Albuquerque, New Mexico

Barney Calhoun fell.

Moments earlier, he had been jerking at the trigger of a pistol with no bullets in a panic, as he raced through black clouds of smoke. His eyes were on the goal, the first leg of an impossible race, the edge of the road. But as he ran, the goal was suddenly blocked out by a shimmering green ring literally inches from his face. When he came to his senses (which was probably a few seconds later), he found himself twenty feet above the top of a mesa. It was not until he had fallen fifteen feet that he realized he was not going to touch down onto the top of the mountain.

He missed the top by a foot and fell on, watching the sheer wall of the mesa roll past his field of vision at an increasing pace. He flailed his arms about in a desperate attempt to touch the wall, but it was no use. He fell like a dead weight.

It was not until the wall began sloping away into the flat desert that he could touch the wall. He reached out with his right hand, but in the few seconds that contact was made, Barney's palm was nearly torn off. He kicked with his feet to touch the wall, with an unexpected success. The feet touched, but they only succeeded in

tearing away a blinding stream of rubble from the fragile rock. He fell on.

As the ground grew steadily closer, he forced himself not to panic but to watch out for any other means of survival. He noted again the sloped foot of the mesa. If he could just roll as he landed...

The ground came quickly, and before Barney could rethink his chances, he struck the ground, turning his body and beginning to roll down the foothill. He survived shattered legs, but hitting the ground was far harder than he expected. He botched the rest of the performance, and found himself tumbling head over heels, breaking away chunks of rock, scraping against pools of scree, and colliding with unforgiving yucca plants and cacti. When he came to a stop in a cloud of dust, the pain overwhelmed the urge to lift his face off the already hot ground, and he lay there, motionless.

Tuesday, 7:46 A.M.- One Mile Southeast of Albuquerque, New Mexico

Alfonso drove like a man being calm under pressure, but in reality, his grip on the steering wheel was moist, and his eyes alone were watching the road while his mind was elsewhere.

What the talk show host, Bob, interpreted as a slow morning, Alfonso interpreted as a grim sign of the unexpected. Given the forcefulness of the attack on Carrizozo, a small town in reality, Alfonso thought that the aliens had concentrated all their forces on it. But if Albuquerque was already a ghost town, and contact with the city was perfectly fine the night before, it meant two things. One, Carrizozo was not the only town attacked. Two, the alien force was much larger than anticipated.

As Alfonso neared the city, his worst fears were confirmed. A green sign noting nearby motels, gas stations and restaurants was knocked down, while a car lay overturned yards away. The car was undisturbed; no police officers had come to assess the scene, and no paramedics had attempted to free any survivors.

Alfonso brought the car to a carefully quiet halt. Ahead about two hundred yards, a group of vortigaunts and houndeyes were crossing the road. Behind them, keeping them in check, was a hulking garg, who barked orders with a booming voice. Alfonso slouched in his seat.

Suddenly, a houndeye stopped moving, its eye fixed on Alfonso's car. With a morbidly joyful chirp, the houndeye began galloping his way.

\_Oh shit,\_ Alfonso thought.

The garg roared and stomped the ground with its left foot, elevating the police car for a moment. The houndeye turned around, and the garg spoke at it in an angry, alien tongue. Briefly, the houndeye looked back at Alfonso's car, then it returned to its place in the ranks. Moments later, the group was gone.

Alfonso sat up. He placed his hands on the steering wheel again, carefully turned the car 180 degrees, and slammed his foot on the gas pedal until it would go down no more.

Tuesday, 8:01 A.M.- Thirty Miles North of Albuquerque, New Mexico

For a long time, Barney stared lazily at the dirt inches from his face with unfocused, non-shifting eyes. It wasn't until the pain of the burning and bumpy ground became worse than pain elsewhere did he try to get up.

The process was painful. He tried pushing himself onto his feet with his arms, but a sudden sharp pain in his left arm forced him to stop; the arm was broken. He rolled over, only to realize how painful both his back and his feet felt.

He finally got to his feet, swaying like a drunk, reaching out to a nearby boulder to steady himself. He screamed like a madman when, in his forgetfulness, he put half his body weight on his left arm when reaching the boulder.

Cradling his left arm with his right, Barney scanned the horizon. He was sure he had been taken someplace else by the portal, but where? Had he been placed in the middle of the desert, miles from any road?

But in the distance, to the west, he imagined that he could see a road. Part of him said, \_Forget it. It's just a mirage.\_ The other part of him said, \_Screw it. I'll try anyways.\_

So on he walked, bearing a broken arm that was becoming increasingly painful, limping with one sprained ankle, wincing against the throbbing pain of cuts caused by yucca blades and of cactus needles lodged deep in his flesh. Then, suddenly, a new pain hit him. He was thirsty. Incredibly so, now that he was being hit by one hundred degree weather. All the while, he kept his eyes on that road.

When he was a mile or so away, he imagined seeing a green truck driving down the road. He picked up the pace, ignoring the pain, fueled by the sudden chance of his survival. He made good distance, covering half a mile, but the truck was passing, and the realization that he wouldn't make it hit him as hard as any truck would.

"Stop," he croaked. Again, louder, "Stop! Stop the truck!" The truck drove on. He fell to his knees and screamed so loud that his lungs burned, "\_Hey! Stop! I'm out here! Help me! Stop the goddamned truck and HELP ME!"\_

With a screech, the truck stopped.

Tuesday, 8:25 A.M.- Eighteen Miles North of Albuquerque, New Mexico

Cal shuffled lazily down the road, keeping his eyes on his feet to avoid losing the desire to go any further. He knew he was an impossibly far walking distance from civilization. He just didn't want to \_know\_ know it.

The distant squawk of buzzards kept him mildly entertained. Perhaps they were feasting on the remains of a coyote's overnight feast; or, perhaps they were harvesting the results of the disaster by feasting on an unfortunate victim of the aliens. In the depths of his slipping

mind, the answer to this question was more urgent than finding civilization.

He suddenly realized that the squawks of buzzards were not all he could hear. There was also the sound of an engine in high gear. And the sound was growing louder.

Cal lifted his eyes to the seemingly infinite desert ahead and saw a green spot on the shimmering horizon. When it was closer, he recognized the details, the insignia, and the color of a U.S. Army jeep and truck.

"Hey!" he shouted, waving his arms and going into a jog. "Over here! Hey! Hey!"

Are you so urgent to give them the alien's message? His mind questioned suddenly. Cal slowed to a stop and let his arms drop. But the truck kept coming.

"No," Cal said aloud. "I will not give them the message."

The jeep came to a stop ten feet in front of him, and the truck stopped slightly farther off. Cal walked swiftly with a grin on his face. "Oh, man," he said. "You have no idea how glad..."

"Stand back!" the driver shouted, whipping out a pistol. Cal stared dumbly at the pistol. Quickly, the driver was joined by several soldiers, all pointing armed AK-47s at Cal's chest.

"Whoa, whoa," Cal said, raising his hands and stepping back. "I'm not..."

"Check him!" someone said. "He may be contaminated!"

Cal's eyes widened. "What?" he said. But it happened more quickly than his mind could process. The soldiers grabbed him with iron grips, forcing him to lay down on a stretcher in the back of the truck. They stripped off his shirt, stuck needles in him, checked his breath, his heart rate, his breathing. When they brought out an anal probe, Cal's eyes grew wide and he struggled to get up. The soldiers roughly pushed him down, and someone said, "Sedate him!" A final needle was stuck into him. His mind grew cloudy, and the world drifted away.

Tuesday, 9:10 A.M.- Thirty miles south of Raton, New Mexico

Cal came to on a green, military cot inside a green, military tent. He sat up, and found out that he was in just his boxers. In a nearby makeshift wardrobe, he saw a a brown shirt and loose-fitting camouflage pants. He put on both and went outside.

Outside, he was immediately met with a gun to the chest. The soldier, quite young, said, "Sir, I have direct orders to keep you inside your tent, sir!"

Cal waved his hands helplessly. "But I just..."

"Direct orders, sir!" the soldier yelled. "If you resist, force will be used and you will be moved to a higher-security facility, sir!"

"That's enough, private."

The voice came from a nearby tent. Out of the tent came a tall man in an officer's uniform. When he came near, the soldier snapped to attention.

"Stand down, private," the man said.

"Sir! Yes, sir!" The soldier backed away, and the man offered Cal his hand.

"Captain Edward Clark," the man said.

"Uh, Calvin Anderson," Cal said, shaking the hand.

"I apologize for the hostility of our first meeting," Clark said. "But we have a rather dangerous military threat here in New Mexico. We can't take any chances."

"You already know?" Cal said, feeling dumb for saying it.

The captain nodded solemnly. "We've known about it for quite a while, actually," he said. "When the problem first began at the Black Mesa Research Facility, we cracked down hard. Military squads were given the order to shoot anything that moves. Back then, our main goal was nondisclosure. We wanted this to die in Black Mesa."

As he spoke, Clark walked Cal through the camp. Cal got the impression of a camp set up as quickly as possible. Even so, it seemed more like a bunker than a camp.

"Unfortunately, it did not die," the captain said. "The forces sent there were inadequate and were forced to retreat. When we returned, the place was completely overrun. Our tactics changed quickly from offense to defense. We're now trying to prevent the invasion from spreading."

Cal sighed. "Well, two cities are already gone," he said. "Carrizozo and Albuquerque."

The captain laughed softly. "More than that," he said. "Socorro, Roswell, and pretty much all of southern New Mexico has been wiped away. We've been combing the highways for survivors like you. So far, our success is depressingly minimal."

The vortigaunt's words played in Cal's head: "To stop us is you cannot do." They chilled him, despite the broken English. He said, "What will you do once you're sure there are no other survivors?"

Clark sighed. "Nuke," he said. "Nuke the entire contaminated area. We want to take no chances about this, even if it means destroying a good portion of civilized land on U.S. Soil."

Cal looked at his feet. It was an ideal solution, seeing how anything else would undoubtedly fail, but he couldn't help but think of the house that had been his home for all his life. He thought how, right now, the jeep halfway through the front door was probably already settled, and how his bedroom might be a nest for...

"Now," Clark said, leading Cal into a large, hospital tent. "I suppose you'd like to meet the other survivors we found."

The first person was a middle-aged, bald man, who had a bandage wrapped around his head; Cal thought he could see stitches. Next to him was a black mother with two sleeping infants in her arms, all badly bruised. Next was a young man wearing a disheveled, dusty business suit.

"Most of these people were found inside a school bus," Clark was saying. "From what I'm told, a school bus for summer school was moving through the neighborhood of Carrizozo when the invasion started. People fled into the streets and, seeing this empty school bus, forced the bus driver to allow them on. They successfully made it out of the city, but when they were halfway across the desert, they were ambushed by several aliens, and the bus crashed. Most of them were killed, but none of them would be here if it wasn't for this man."

Clark motioned Cal to a uniformed police officer sitting on a footlocker.

"Lieutenant Lopez!" Cal cried.

Alfonso frowned at him. Suddenly, he remembered, and standing up with a smile, he shook Cal's hand and said, "Hey, kid. Looks like you made it out all right!"

"Lieutenant Lopez here encountered the fallen bus on his way out of Albuquerque," Clark explained. "He wasted no time in eliminating the creatures and rescuing the survivors."

Alfonso's face turned red, but he continued smiling. "Just doing my job," he said. "'Serve and protect.'"

Cal moved towards the back of the tent, where several people lay hooked up to machines. The first of them was a middle-aged woman with graying hair. His mother.

Cal fell to his knees and gently grasped his mother's hand, while his swollen eyes swelled with tears. "Mom, it's me," he whispered.

His mother turned her head and slowly opened her eyes. "Oh, Cal," she said weakly. "You made it all right."

"Yeah," Cal said with a chuckle. "I thought you had been through worse. When I woke up, you and dad were gone, and later, dad..."

His mother sighed, turning her head the other way. "I had a feeling," she whispered. She smiled again. "But you're all right, Cal. That's what matters."

Cal stood up and looked at Clark with a frown. "What happened to her?" he said.

Clark leaned in close. "She was on the bus, as you can imagine," he said. "She endured the worst punishment of everyone here. She was near the front, you see, and when the bus crashed... well, I'm surprised she survived it at all. As far as well can tell, she has a

broken leg, three broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a minor brain hemorrhage. And that's just the big stuff."

Cal took in air sharply. "Will she... live?" he asked.

Clark shrugged. "We're doing our best to hold her," he said. "But she needs a real hospital, and fast. We're making arrangements to get her helicoptered to a hospital in Boulder, but until then, her chances are slim."

Cal looked at his mother's frail body, motionless and hooked up to several humming, beeping machines. His stomach churned. He glanced over at the bulky machines, then suddenly, he saw a familiar figure out of the corner of his eye. He looked at the bed next to his mother's, and there, with a cast on his left arm and a sling around his left foot, lay Barney Calhoun.

Cal stood over the bed. Barney opened his eyes and looked at him.

"You made it," Cal said.

Barney groaned. "Not as well as you did, it looks like," he muttered.

"How are you feeling?"

Barney laughed. "Pretty good," he said. "For a guy who just fell down a cliff and got cactus in his ass." He looked at Cal curiously. "How did you get out? Everything happened so fast..."

Cal said, "One of those creatures... a 'Nihilanth,' they called it... warped me to Albuquerque, where... and you won't believe this... one of those vortigaunts talked to me."

Barney sat up. "You're kidding," he said. "What did it say?"

Cal sighed. "It said for me to tell the human race to give up the fight."

Cal nearly jumped when Clark spoke inches from his ear. "That's ridiculous!" he said. "Sure, they've conquered southern New Mexico quickly and effectively, but that's only a fraction of the continental United States, and we have thousands of powerful nukes at our disposal! And then there's the rest of the planet... I'm telling you, there's no way we're giving up this early in the fight. You go ahead and tell them that, messenger boy."

Cal frowned. "Uh, actually," he said, "I have no way of..."

There was shouting outside the tent. Clark turned and quickly left the tent. Cal and Alfonso hurried after him. Outside, there was a group of soldiers gathered around a spot of bare dirt, to which an army jeep, followed by an army truck, was bound. The jeep came to a jolting stop, and an officer jumped out, saluting Clark when he touched down. Behind them, soldiers flooded out of the back of the truck.

"What'd you find, Sergeant Ford?" Clark said.

"No one alive, sir," said Ford. "All we found was this. In the middle of the road." He pulled out a dusty, black suitcase. On the side was a white symbol, partially obscured by clumps of dirt:  $\hat{I}$ . Clark cracked the suitcase open. Inside was a single document. It was written in shorthand, and read:

ANOMALOUS MATERIALS- SAMPLE OBTAINED, TESTED. EXPERIMENT PENDING ARRIVAL OF MATERIAL HANDLER FREEMAN. SAMPLE HALF-LIFE DETERMINED TO BE ONE DAY AND EIGHT HOURS.

"What the hell is this?" Clark said. "Sample? Experiment?"

Cal read over it. When he was done, he scanned the entire page, until his eyes rested on the header, which read: "Black Mesa Research Facility." He said, "Give it to Mr. Calhoun. I'll bet he knows something about it."

Clark went into the medical tent, woke up Barney, and handed him the document. When Barney was done, he closed his eyes. "Get your battlements ready," he said. "They'll be here by noon."

## 6. Nondisclosure

Tuesday, 10:55 A.M.- Thirty miles south of Raton, New Mexico

The camp was alive with activity, with soldiers, medics, officers and civilians running madly about like ants whose hill had just been destroyed. Sandbags were being placed on the south end of the camp, while sentry guns and mounted machine guns were being hammered in place. Scouts with binoculars were scanning the horizon for any sign of activity, and occasionally setting out to examine some anomaly. So far, all anomalies turned out to be merely animal life. Alfonso watched the activity with a child-like interest, until a soldier thrust himself in front of Alfonso's face.

"Do you know how to use a gun, sir?" the soldier said.

Alfonso stuttered for a moment, before replying, "I'm a cop, aren't I?"

The soldier silently handed him an AK-47. "This is a lot like using a pistol," he said. "Only it's more powerful. Fire in quick bursts for better efficiency. Keep the safety on until the order to fire is given or there'll be hell to pay." With that, the soldier rushed away. Alfonso blinked at the gun in his hands.

Meanwhile, Clark was leaning against an army truck, speaking to his superior through a radio. Sergeant Ford approached him, and stood rigidly and silently until the captain switched off the radio with a disgusted grunt. The sergeant saluted Clark.

"At ease," Clark muttered.

Ford relaxed his posture. "Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

The sergeant glanced over at the medical tent, then leaned in and



said, "Sir, how can we know if this Calhoun guy's reliable?"

Clark shrugged. "He's the only man alive with any connection to the disaster at Black Mesa," he said. "We have no choice but to trust him."

"May I ask him, sir?"

The captain nodded absently. "Sure."

Ford saluted again, before turning and ducking into the medical tent. Alfonso watched him go, and then when he was out of sight, continued examining his weapon.

"These people must be desperate," Cal said, walking up to him, with an AK-47 in his own hands. "Giving a weapon with live ammunition to a kid who periodically shoots beer cans with a shotgun."

Alfonso shrugged. "Must be," he said. "Although, seeing as we've already fought our way past these aliens, they probably trust us more than the average civilian."

Ford rushed out of the tent and went straight to Clark, who was putting a lighter to a cigarette in his mouth. "Well?" said the captain, taking the cigarette into his left hand.

Ford shook his head and frowned. "He said something about the document relating to the series of events leading up to the present," he said. "Since the attacks began yesterday at roughly around four in the morning, the 'Half-Life' of the invasion... that is, the turning point... would be today at noon."

Clark snorted. "Those aliens sure are cocky," he said. "They assume the turning point before it begins."

Ford shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Well," he said. "If the invasion force could divide itself into a dozen or more parts and conquer a city with each part before dawn, then if they attack here..."

Clark rolled his eyes and exhaled a stream of smoke. "Relax, sergeant," he said. He juggled the radio in his right hand. "See this? With it, I can call in reinforcements from Fort Carson and Schriever, and in less than an hour, our forces will be increased tenfold. If that's not enough, the general's going to give the OK for this place to be nuked. Understood?"

Ford did not seem satisfied. He said quietly, "Yes, sir," and walked away.

Tuesday, 11:46 A.M.- Thirty miles south of Raton, New Mexico

"What are you going to do when this mess is over?" Cal asked. He and Alfonso were on a couple of green boxes, watching the military scramble die down as their defense was nearing completion.

Alfonso chuckled. "Quit the force," he said. "Or what's left of it. Then I'm gonna get a case of cold ones and drink myself silly. You?"

Cal thought hard for a long time. "Well, I can tell you one thing I'm not going to do," he said.

"What's that?"

"Watch sci-fi films," he said. "Ever."

Cal and Alfonso both laughed. Cal looked down and kicked a clump of dirt with his right foot. "You think we'll be able to?" he said.

"Sure," Alfonso said. "This gig is more than enough to hold them off."

"I think Barney would disagree."

Alfonso shrugged. "What can I say," he said. "Barney spent God-knows-how-long in an underground labyrinth, fighting those things at unfair odds with an uncertain supply of ammo. Here, the playing field is level, the allies are numerous, and the ammo is plentiful. However well these things warped his mind into thinking of doom and despair, it doesn't change the fact that we stand a good chance."

Cal nodded. "I hope you're right," he said.

There were shouts coming from the south. A pair of scouts were running up to camp, shouting. When they got closer, Cal made out the words, "Hostiles! We've got hostiles!"

"Battle stations!" Captain Clark shouted.

Hundreds of soldiers simultaneously crouched behind the sandbags, pointing their weapons at the horizon. A technician ducked into a nearby tent and activated the sentry guns. Cal and Alfonso joined the soldiers, fumbling to get the safeties off their weapons. They watched the horizon, waiting for the clusters of vortigaunts, grunts and controllers to turn into a seething mass of thousands. But no more came over the horizon.

A series of electric bursts from the other three sides of the camp caught their attention. The soldiers looked up and around, and, in their final moment of peace, realized their fallacy.

Mounted guns were abandoned and sentry guns were overturned as vicious aliens rushed the soldiers from behind. Machine gun fire filled the air as they struggled to fight back. Many were instantly slain, and the others found themselves leaping over the sandbags and rolling into a ravine, only to find themselves face-to-face with the clusters of aliens that had come from the south.

Cal pushed through the opposing force into the center of the camp, finding himself in a confusing melee. Soldiers crouched behind whatever barriers they could find, shooting at aliens as they darted back and forth, picking them off one by one. Cal saw Sergeant Ford climb out of a military truck and, with a pistol, fire thrice into a vortigaunt's chest. When it fell, he stood there, tensely glancing about for any more attackers. There was a booming groan from behind. Ford dropped his pistol and looked at the ground, eyes closed.

The military truck was thrown onto its side, landing squarely on Ford. Behind it stood a growling garg.

\_We meet again,\_ Cal thought, scrambling away until he was hidden behind a tent. The garg shot a stream of fire through the center of the camp, tearing through tents and sandbags and bodies. The sound of a series of metal clanking together came from behind, and Cal turned to see three tanks approach the garg. They each fired four rounds, but each shot only seemed to anger the brute. It charged up its attack and sent forth a stream of fire, instantly rendering all three tanks into scrap metal.

Cal turned to find himself face-to-face with a grunt, its bee weapon ready. Clark tackled Cal with a yell, then turned and let loose a flurry of bullets from his AK-47. The grunt shot five bees through Clark's chest, and the captain fell. Cal pushed his body aside and fired his own weapon, finishing the job.

Cal patted the captain's body down until he came up with the radio. He switched it on and, doing his best to imitate Clark, said, "Emergency. Reinforcements needed. Send as soon as..."

"Who the hell is this?" said a voice on the other end of the line.

But before Cal could answer, a group of Controllers appeared in the sky above, growing from a mere half dozen to well over four score. It began raining orbs of energy. Cal tucked the radio into his pocket and dove for cover.

He turned and saw the garg rip away the medical tent, and then grunt in surprise at all the immobile humans within. It growled with sadistic pleasure, raised its fists, charged its fire attack—it was at this moment that Cal realized he was in the path of the fire attack, but it was too late. The attack was released.

Tuesday, 12:15 A.M.- Albuquerque Corrections Facility, New Mexico

When Cal felt his senses gradually trickle back into reality, he knew all too well what had happened to him.

He found himself lying on a damp concrete floor, naked and unarmed. When he pushed himself up, the first thing he saw was a row of rusty metal bars. He was in a prison.

Glancing around, he saw that the rest of his cell was just as bad. The walls were once painted white, but this had worn away to sparse white patches, and was now replaced by the aliens' morbid sense of fashion; splatters of dried human blood.

Aside from the walls and the corroded bars, Cal saw a toilet of crumbling porcelain attached to a rusty pipe going into the wall, and a bench. On top of the bench was a crumpled prison uniform. Cal picked it up and looked at it. It was at least five sizes too big for him, and it had a hole surrounded by a ring of old blood in the chest area. Cal shivered, but put the uniform on nevertheless.

Cal turned. In the corridor outside, a Nihilanth had appeared, and was now probing in Cal's mind. Within moments, the creature began to

speak.

"\_Hear me, O unlucky survivors,\_" the Nihilanth said. Cal realized that he was not the only one spared, and that the Nihilanth was now speaking simultaneously to all the survivors in the prison. "\_I speak for all the conquistadors from Xen. You have been spared simply because our plan calls for it. When a certain percentage of the inferiors have been eliminated, the rest, preferably the strongest, will be relocated to a prison hold, where they will await assignments to slavery. If you were not able-bodied when we captured you and wonder why you were spared, woe is you. Your destiny lies not in slavery, but rather, as food for our precious mawmen, bullsquids and barnacles.\_"

Cal thought of Barney and swallowed hard.

"\_Our conquest has gone according to plan so far. As I speak, our forces are moving on to other inferior-populated areas. But know that, for you, the war is over.\_"

The Nihilanth drifted away.

Tuesday, 12:21 A.M.- Albuquerque Corrections Facility, New Mexico

Barney sat on the bench in his cell, wearing a prison uniform and cradling his broken arm. He listened intently as the Nihilanth spoke. When it was done, he groaned softly.

Hours passed. Vortigaunts traveled up and down the corridors regularly. When they entered a cell, blood-curdling screams echoed out into the giant prison. This occurred infrequently at first, but then it became nonstop. Occasionally, a prisoner was escorted to the basement, where Barney could faintly discern sounds of a feeding frenzy.

"I can't believe this," he muttered. "I've made it this far, only to be penned in like a pig waiting to be slaughtered."

He heard some rustling in one of the neighboring cells. Then, a voice: "Barney. Is that you?"

Barney put his face up to the bars.

"Cal!" he cried. "You made it!"

"Yeah," Cal said. "But I think this is it. I don't think they're going to spare us anymore."

Barney jiggled the bars. They felt loose. "Well, don't give up all hope," he said. "We may just be able toâ€¦"

A vortigaunt shuffled down the corridor, stopping at Barney's cell. Barney's face turned white.

But the creature moved on. It stopped again. Barney heard it open the door to Cal's cell and walk inside.

"\_Remember me you do?\_" The vortigaunt sputtered.

Cal said nothing.

"\_We talk high up there place,\_" the vortigaunt continued.

"Ohâ€| yes," Cal said monotonously.

"\_You not obey me command,\_" the vortigaunt said harshly. "\_Now, you die long.\_"

The creature began charging the all-too-familiar electrical attack, but stopped short. The bolt struck Cal, and instantly, his limbs went dead and he hit his head hard on the floor. The creature began charging again, and again stopped short. Cal's limbs flailed uncontrollably, and he screamed, hearing nothing but the crackle of high-energy electricity eating his flesh, seeing nothing but swirling spots of color, feeling nothing but the pain.

Another bolt struck, and another, and another. Cal was shuddering uncontrollably. At one point, he was sure he broke his arm against the bedpost, but the pain was lost in the intense agony the vortigaunt was causing him.

At last, after what seemed like years of torment, the vortigaunt stopped. Cal lay on the floor, his skin black and his hair singed, moaning. Through one open eye, he saw the vortigaunt, standing at the door and watching him with merciless eyes.

"\_Back soon I will be,\_" the vortigaunt said, and he shut the door behind him.

Tuesday, 12:25 A.M.- Albuquerque Corrections Facility, New Mexico

Barney heard it all. When the vortigaunt finally left the cell, he leaned his head out, trying to see if Cal was still alive.

"Pst," he whispered. "Hey, Cal, are you all right?"

Cal mumbled something. Although it was a sign that he was alive, it wasn't helpful.

"Cal!" he said, louder this time.

"Yeah," came the quiet reply.

Barney shook the bars again. The concrete base began to crumble away, and the first bar came loose in his hands. He carefully put it back in place. "Hey, kid, about my idea," he said. "This prison looks old. I bet theyâ€| that is, the Earthlingsâ€| haven't used it for decades. If we managed to break through these barsâ€|"

"Barney," Cal said weakly. "I'm probably not going to make it."

Barney knew it to be true, still, he pressed on. "Nonsense," he said. "Look, I'll wait until the nighttime. Then, I'll break down my bars, and when I'm out, I'll go over and help you break down yours!"

"I don't have until nighttime," Cal muttered. "He says he'll be back soon."

"Well, I'll justâ€¦"

"Listen, Barney," Cal said. Barney could hear him trying to get up in the other cell. "They took all our stuff. It's probably locked up somewhere in this prison."

"Soâ€¦"

"The \_radio\_, Barney. I put Clark's radio in my pants pocket. If you can break free, find where they put our stuff and use the radio to call in reinforcements."

Barney nodded. He moved away from the bars as the vortigaunt returned to Cal's cell. He grimaced and held his hands over his ears until the screams and electrical bursts stopped. Unfortunately, the screams ended much earlier than the electrical bursts. The vortigaunt left the cell, and continued on to its next victim.

"\_Dirty bastards,\_" he growled. But there was nothing he could do. Nothing to do but wait, and endure the screams and howls of the other prisoners until the darkness of night fell upon the prison.

Tuesday, 9:03 P.M.- Albuquerque Corrections Facility, New Mexico

Barney waited until the alien activity in the area came almost to a halt. There were still a few vortigaunts patrolling the corridors, but none near his cell.

Barney quietly removed the first bar he had loosened, and set it on the cot. He moved to the second, removed that with nothing but a few scrapings of metal against concrete to be heard, and placed it next to the first one. He had the most trouble with the third, since he had the least time to loosen it, but managed to get it out of the floor and onto the bed with little noise.

Barney almost went into the corridor without a weapon. He looked around, saw the toilet, and removed the short pipe from the back. It was long enough to be a weapon, and short enough to carry with ease.

When he was sure no vortigaunts were looking, Barney squeezed through the gap in the bars and crawled along the floor. He was on the second floor of the prison. When he looked around for some stairs, he saw with dismay that there was a vortigaunt at the nearest flight of stairs, and another was blocking his way to the stairs on the other end of the corridor. Barney looked over the railing to the floor below. He climbed over the railing, took a deep breath, and jumped.

His bare feet hit the concrete floor hard, and he rolled to dampen the sound and his fall. He managed to stifle a cry as his body rolled over his broken arm. He got to his feet, and moved onward. He saw a door at the other end of the prison block, and if he managed toâ€¦

\_It's the dream,\_" he heard himself say. \_The dream is coming to life.\_

"Then why is it different?\_"\_ he replied. "My dreams were during the day, and there were screamsâ€¦ I remember the screamsâ€¦"

\_Neither dream was exactly the same. But they both shared one thing in common.\_

"What's that?"

\_When you went through that door down there, you were killed.\_

Barney stopped. He looked at the door with a frown. He could faintly hear the guttural mutterings of the vortigaunts within.

"Where do I go then?"

\_The other way.\_

Barney turned around, and sure enough, there was a door at the other end of the block. He ran towards it.

When he entered and turned the first corner, he found himself in a more comfortable, but equally aging, room. To the left was a library, filled with rotting file cabinets. To his right was the warden's office. At the door of the warden's office, a vortigaunt stood. It didn't seem to see him. Barney held up the pipe and exhaled.

He lunged forward, bringing the pipe over his head, and brought it down on the vortigaunt, crushing its skull and bursting one of its eyes. The creature fell without a sound, landing in a pool of its own green blood.

Barney moved quickly now, entering the warden's office and shutting the door. He saw a set of switches at the far wall, and without a thought of which one to hit, he hit them all.

In the prison block, two things happened. The lights each came on with a click, illuminating the block and the surprised vortigaunts within. And, more importantly, every one of the prison doors opened simultaneously.

"Jailbreak!" Barney screamed, and left the office.

Tuesday, 9:10 P.M.- Albuquerque Corrections Facility, New Mexico

As he had hoped, the remaining prisoners flooded into the corridor, each hoping the chaos they created collectively would give them a chance to escape. At first, the few vortigaunts who were there were so overwhelmed that they could not hit a single prisoner; in fact, one vortigaunt went from predator to prey as a group of five prisoners ganged up on it and beat it to death.

But, as if the entire place were watched by some supreme being, the vortigaunts had sudden reinforcements. At least a dozen alien creatures had warped into the block, and they began bringing the prisoners down one by one.

Barney found himself swarmed by panicked prisoners as they flooded into the hallway, nearly trampling him. Among them, Barney recognized a familiar face.

"Lopez!" he shouted. "Lietuenant Lopez!"

Alfonso stopped and joined Barney. "Hey!" he said with a grin. "So, this was your doing, huh?"

"Yeah," Barney said. "No time to explain. We've got to find out where they're hiding our stuff."

Alfonso shrugged. "I can't help you without a weaponâ€|"

Barney ducked into the warden's office and searched the drawers. In the bottom one, he found a loaded revolver. He tossed it to Alfonso, and the two of them moved down the hallway.

They turned another corner, and Barney found that they might not have the advantage of numbers for long. Three vortigaunts were lined up in their way, and behind them stood a towering grunt. The prisoners were being slaughtered. Those who remained turned around and ran off. Alfonso took down the three vortigaunts with a shot to the chest each, but the grunt took the last three bullets.

"I'm out," he said.

"Forget it," Barney answered. "Let's keep moving. Search the rooms around here for their stash of clothing. Hurry!"

Barney moved into the library. In there, he bashed the cabinets open to see if they had been stuffed with clothes.

"Hey, Calhoun!" Alfonso shouted. "In here!"

Barney rushed out of the library and ran down the hall, where he saw Alfonso pointing to a large utility room.

"Look out!" he screamed.

Alfonso dove for cover just as he was struck by a bolt of electricity from behind. The utility room was being guarded by a vortigaunt. Yelling like a madman, Barney ran, leapt up, and swung his pipe into the creature's neck, before it had time to even begin charging up for another attack. Its backbone was cracked and its windpipe crushed, the vortigaunt fell to the ground and slowly began to die.

Barney helped Alfonso to his feet. The vortigaunt's attack had put a deep, sizzling gouge in his right shoulder, and his arm hung dead.

"I'll be all right," Alfonso muttered through set teeth. "You look."

The room was filled with clothes, but they were thankfully filled with mostly military uniforms; Cal's jeans were easy to spot. Barney leapt upon them and began searching the pockets.

"Gah!" Alfonso cried. Barney looked, and he saw Alfonso crouched against the wall by the door, holding his good hand over a fresh wound in his abdomen. At the door was a grunt, preparing another attack.



"Calhoun! The pipe!" Alfonso shouted. Barney threw him the pipe, and before the grunt could fill Barney full of alien insects, Alfonso leapt upon its shoulders and swung his pipe repeatedly at the brute's head. It was a brave effort, albeit fatal, but it did buy Barney some time.

Barney crawled into a corner and began tuning the radio. He hoped the thick concrete and metal structure of the prison wouldn't block out any signal.

"Hello? Clark?" came the voice on the other end.

Barney actually gasped. He looked at the door, where Alfonso was still smacking the grunt with a pipe. He began with a slight stutter: "This is, ah, Barney Calhoun, Black Mesa Research Facility security guard. We have beenâ€¦"

"What?!" the voice shouted angrily. "How'd you get ahold of that device? That's property of Captain Edward Clark, jackass, and if you don't tellâ€¦"

"Listen to me!" Barney screamed. "Clark has been killed! \_Everyone has been killed!\_ And if you don't do something now, there'll be no chance for you to make a recovery! \_The whole fucking world will be meat if you don't send the goddamned nukes right this damn minute!\_"

There was a pause. Then, "You think that's necessary, ah, Calhoun? If we go ahead and move along with that plan, there's be no chance for survivalâ€¦"

Across the utility room, the grunt had thrown Alfonso bodily into a pipe. Bloody pulp splattered the wall, and his corpse fell limp. The grunt took a moment to survey its victory, then moved on to Barney.

"Yes," Barney said. His eyes were full of tears. "There's no other way. The plan must be executed."

Another pause. Then, sullenly, "Good luck, Calhoun." And the line went dead.

Barney stood up, stared the approaching grunt in the eyes, and grinned sadistically. "You're too late," he said. "It doesn't matter whether you kill me or not. You're all dead! Yeah, you understand me, don't you? \_You're all fucking dead!\_"

The grunt fired eight insects into its target, and heard the satisfying thud of his fallen victim. The grunt paused, reflecting on the creature's last outburst, completely devoid of fear.

It moved out of the room, and through the window in the warden's office, saw white streaks coming from the sky. A sudden flash filled the air, and at the horizon, it saw a growing, red cloud. It screamed in horror, ran down the hallway, burst through the wall to the outside, and ran, ran along with the prisoners who managed to escape the building through the yard outside the prison. It gave one last look to the building, gasped to see that one of the white streaks was about to strike the building, and knew no more.

That night, the state of New Mexico, conquered by alien forces, was lit up by a thousand explosions. In the city of Albuquerque, vortigaunts, grunts, and even gargs ran aimlessly, knowing very well the meaning of the white streak heading for the heart of their city. They, and the city around them, were consumed in an instant, while the nihilanth, millions of miles away on Xen, were shocked to discover that some unknown force had disrupted their powers; no more could they warp soldiers to that area.

In one terrifying moment, the entire alien infested state was scrubbed clean. But when it was finished, the spirits of its former inhabitants rested easier. Barney Calhoun, level 2-access security guard of the Black Mesa Research Facility, had done his job. He won the war.

## 7. Epilogue

**\*\*Wednesday, 7:08 A.M.- Near Boulder, Colorado\*\***

Joe Rainey leaned back in his lounge chair in his small farmhouse and folded his copy of The Denver Post to the sports section. He could hear his wife, Martha, washing the dishes from that morning's breakfast, and the small TV she had in there. It was tuned to channel 13, and instead of the usual morning talk show his wife loved to watch, it was a newsbreak.

"We're interrupting this broadcast to bring you an important newsbreak," the announcer said.

"Aw, heck," Martha said to the TV. Joe's wife never swore, and resorting to mild substitutes for swears meant she was exasperated. "It's never really important, you know. They always say it is, but it never is."

A hubbub of thumps came from the hallway. His eight-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, was running from her room to the front door. "I'm going outside to play, Dad!" she called. Joe simply grunted.

"Our country, it seems," began the news anchor, "has been fighting a war on its own soil for the last day. A force witnesses have reported to be alien has conquered all of New Mexico yesterday. Unable to control the invasion, the government gave the ok to nuke the state."

Joe raised an eyebrow, and flipped through the pages of his paper once again. The newspaper didn't have anything about an "invasion" in it. Of course, newspapers were always a day late in picking up stories.

"The invasion has apparently been contained," the reporter was saying, "But casualties are high and the cost of damage done is astronomical. If you have any relatives in the state, officials welcome you to contact them to see if your relative is one of the survivors. They urge you not to call if you're asking about friends or acquaintances, as their phones will already be busy with callers."

"Hey! Look, daddy! A turtle!" Elizabeth cried from outside. Joe put

his paper down and frowned. A \_turtle?\_

"Those who call about friends or acquaintancesâ€|"

"Ew! It's an ugly turtle! It's all gray and redâ€|"

"â€|will be fined considerably. Officials want toâ€|"

"â€|Hey, \_another\_ turtle! It's ugly, too. C'mere, daddy! Look at this!"

"â€|be able to help those with actual relatives among the survivors."

Joe got up from his chair. How could there be two turtles outside? His farm was miles from any habitat he thought turtles might possibly live in, and he was sureâ€|

Outside, Elizabeth began to scream.

**\*\*Half-Life: Breakthrough\*\***

End  
file.